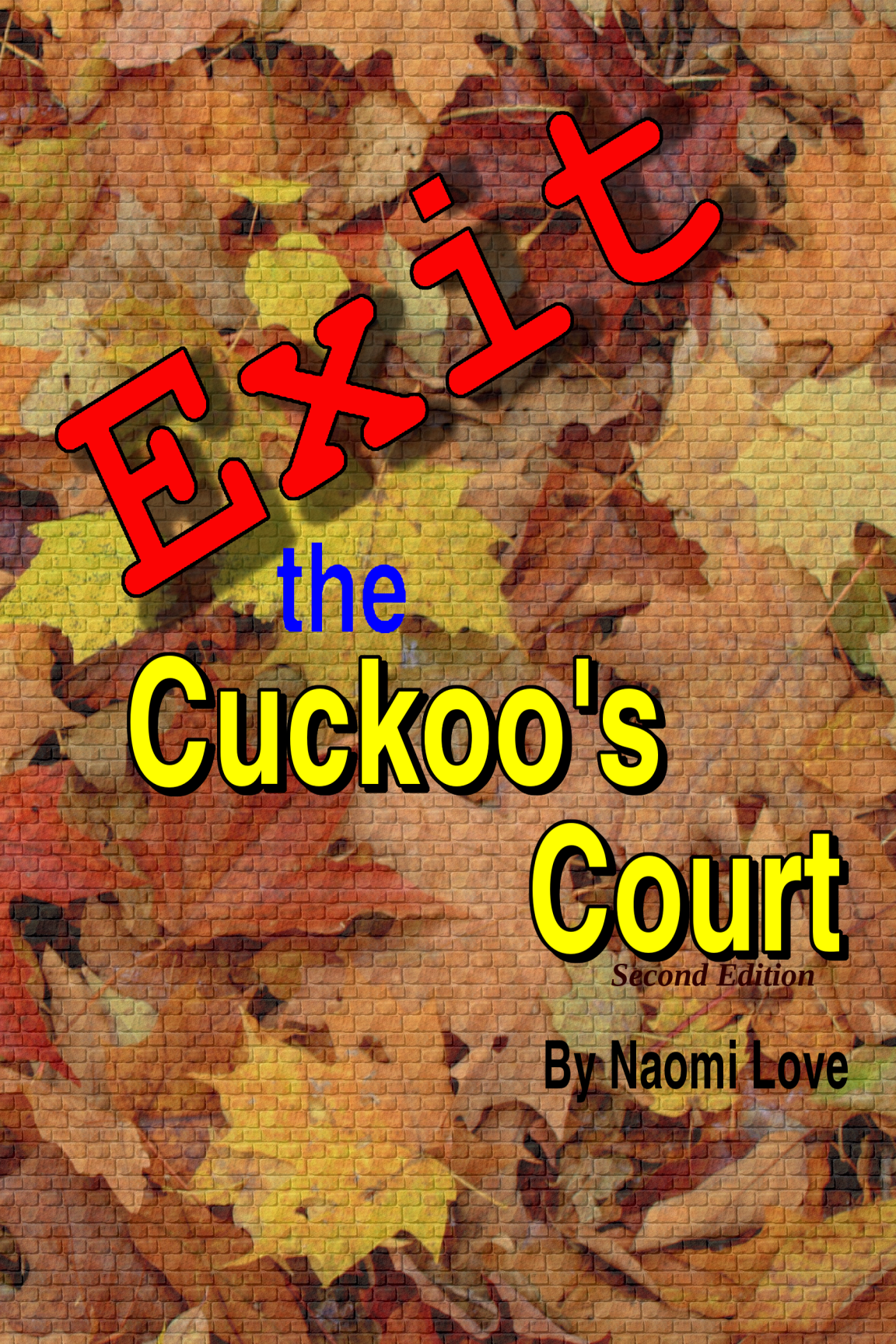
Exit
the
Cuckoo's
Court
Second Edition
By Naomi Love

Exit the Cuckoo's Court

By Naomi Love

For Jane

While this book follows the unique lives of two people, it is meant for anyone who must navigate the court system. This book is dedicated to those women and men whose lives were or could potentially be ruined in marriage court.

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Chapter 1

The Dream

The air is scented when you step off a plane into the tropics. If you've just flown in from a Canadian winter this can be quite a treat. Kat wondered if she would miss dramatically changing seasons.

Almost 60, Kat was a trim woman, 5 foot 3" with dark, curly, salt-and-pepper hair. Her sons, aged 15 to 22, all towered head and shoulders above her.

Jon, David and Tim had participated in the decision to sell their home and move half a world away. When life in Ontario, Canada appeared to offer little hope for this single mother and her three sons, she accepted an offer to teach English abroad. It was a leap of faith for all of them.

Just before Kat and the boys left, her ex husband, Hal made a few half-hearted attempts through the courts to try to cost Kat money. He was the boys' father and a seasoned traveler who would have no trouble visiting them anywhere if he really wanted to. However, the prospect of not paying child support proved a powerful distraction for him.

With this adventure, eleven years of harassment came to an end and the lives of Kat and her 3 sons changed forever.

As they emerged from customs an old friend's familiar face moved toward them through a sea of people.

"You finally made it! Welcome to Vietnam."

If events in Kat's life had snowballed to the point that she and her children were on the verge of losing everything, at least this provided an alternative. Younger people with university degrees were teaching English abroad. Why not a senior?

This was the dream.

Chapter 2

The Con

2006

Hal Solow wasn't handsome. In fact, Kat barely recognized this balding, old man who used to be her husband. But Hal's charm and his eloquent way of framing things had given him the power to take away her voice. His management and sales training had paid off in the courts. For a long time Kat had heard his voice coming through other people: people like her own lawyer; people like the social worker who had helped Hal to take her voice away.

The problem, as Kat saw it, was that everyone *expected* things to be the way Hal said they were. Breadwinners were supposed to try to get out of paying. The parent with custody was supposed to play with the children's heads. And Hal did pay as little as he could get away with. He also tried to play with the children's heads and told the courts that was what Kat was doing. He played the bias of the courts convincingly.

By now, Kat's original words to the courts sounded strange

even to her.

"He wanted to wife-swap me for one of his friend's girlfriends. He considered murder suicide at one time. Shortly before he left the marriage, he told me that he had fantasies about killing people. He asked on several occasions to bring our oldest boy (8) into to our bedroom to watch us make out, "to teach him how"."

It was true. Everything she had ever said was true, but in the court system everyone believes that the truth lies somewhere between both adversaries. Most of Kat's testimony sounded so bizarre in the face of that gentle-seeming, calm man that no one would believe her. Kat was forced to work in that middle ground between Hal's lies and the truth, and try to ignore his threats and harassment behind the scenes.

To further complicate things, over the years Hal and his lawyer, Sis Bumb, appeared to have done their best to leave a paper trail that could ensure Hal continued access to Kat, or at least her (now limited) finances, maybe even once the children were grown.

Hal always managed to own at least one house, but convinced the courts that he'd sold the house he left the marriage with to pay child support. Never mind that Kat was supporting him when they started buying the houses they owned together. Eventually he would move the Overton Window so far that some believed that Kat got a house out of the marriage while he got nothing.

Throughout the process, he traveled the world even as his lawyer exhibited Canadian income tax spread sheets proving his poverty. Meanwhile, he had the wherewithal to keep going in court until he bankrupted Kat.

Kat saw it coming because during the marriage she had

watched Hal do similar, obsessive things to other people. He planned and executed them with the precision of a sociopath. It was always somehow his victim's fault. It was easy for Hal to get away with lying because he believed his own lies. There was an air of sincerity about him when he lied.

And he knew her. Kat lived creatively, home schooling her children through an alternative school and enrichment groups, using doctors and antibiotics as a last resort, and good food and a healthy lifestyle as preventative measures. She made sure that the children knew their babysitters and let them choose the ones they wanted (if and when Hal had agreed to pay for that luxury.

But Hal dragged Kat through the courts making everything she did creatively sound like a felony.

Hal's remarriage to a woman he'd met on a recent expedition overseas was a relief to Kat, but she knew it would not end his harassment. Hal had stalked Maria, another young woman, right into his marriage to Kat 23 years ago. He had stalked several men for years over a few dollars he believed that he deserved from them.

For now the children still didn't know their new stepmother's name. Hal hid his women. He had hidden Kat from anyone who might question the reality he was creating at the time, or who might question things he said about Kat. He would trot this new wife out if it suited his purpose, and then only long enough to prove his own respectability—or her perceived guilt in some matter.

More than 10 years after his departure, Hal was costing Kat more money as he tried to cut short his oldest son's education. The boy, now 20, had been 10 years old when they parted.

Kat had already felt the sting of Hal's passive aggression many times.

From the beginning she told people, "He works through other people."

The problem was that the people who needed to hear it were the ones who were blind to the way in which he was working through them—as Kat so often used to be.

"He might even be above the glass ceiling, in some carpetbagger-ish kind of way."

Mostly she sounded silly to the narrow minds she encountered. They didn't care that Hal seemed to have the money to traverse the world on seemingly fruitless business trips. The trick would be to prove it. He was pretty good at covering his tracks.

Hal appeared to be, at least financially, above the glass ceiling. Before Kat and Hal even parted, Hal and some of his business partners had secured a sale which deposited money into the offshore account of a numbered business they owned. This enabled Hal and his partners to withdraw $500 a day from any bank machine in the world without being traced or monitored by the government. Even when he appeared to be destitute on his income tax returns, Hal had the wherewith all to outlast Kat in court.

For 11 years Kat's life would resemble the Franz Kafka play, "The Trial."[1]

[1]Kafka, Franz (July 3, 1883 to June 3, 1924) - "The Trial": A German play in which a bank clerk is arrested one day and searches through the absurd machinations of the legal system to discover the nature of the charges. He never finds out and is killed 'like a dog'. (littlebluelight.com) The term, Kafkaesque, denotes mundane yet absurd circumstances, like those found in Kafka's works. (wikipedia.org)

It could have been worse ... a lot worse. She knew she was lucky to get away at all. But in the aftermath of their separation and divorce Hal was systematically trying to break her down. Had Kat chosen a conventional course of action or played into his games, Hal's plans might have had more success. Had Hal been less obsessive, Kat might have been able to resume some of her old life. Had Kat been more outgoing or valued her independence less, she might have built a more protective new life.

He knew her too well. He knew she would try to make things work on her own. He knew she would protect the children even at her own expense. With less intelligent children Hal's apparent plan to divide and conquer might have worked.

His legal and financial harassment went on and on.

Without Hal's friend Lou, Kat wondered if she would even have had to courage to leave the marriage.

Kat wasn't stupid but she had been very naive.

Chapter 3

Early Years

Kat, from 1954

"Don't do that."

Johnny's face was sombre when he spoke. He was a serious little boy whom 4-year-old Kat had rescued from the Kindergarten teacher—the same Kindergarten teacher who had spanked Kat, hard, for crying. Johnny was regularly humiliated in class, made to sit in the corner because he couldn't speak English. Kat usually walked him home and sometimes stayed to play. Johnny's house was halfway to hers along a quarter-mile trek.

"My mom and dad said it might break my trains!"

His English was improving rapidly. He never spoke to Kat in Polish any more.

"You thought it was fun the last time."

Kat always wanted to play with Johnny's electric trains. To the distress of Johnny's hardworking, immigrant parents, she liked to make block walls and let Johnny's expensive

trains break them down. It was Johnny's idea in the first place, and for Kat a lot of fun.

"Can I build a bridge, then?"

Just watching trains go 'round and 'round quickly wore thin for Kat, but watching them go under bridges she and Johnny had built was almost as good as seeing how many blocks it would take to stop the train.

As supper time approached Kat was sent home—past a field of brilliant wildflowers to the gully where once or twice children's bodies had been found. At the gully, the weight of Kat's day at school always left her. Soft ringlets bobbing, she would run or skip down the hill into the gully, over the little open sewer that ran through it, and up the other side. As she came over the crest of the hill, two little kittens who had been waiting on her lawn would dash across the yard and jump into her arms.

In the early days, Kat was an anomaly. She was a shy child who won a "quiet contest" at a children's party without even knowing the contest was on. She was a curious child who confronted a bully almost twice her size in the schoolyard, because she wanted to see what a bully was. She was too shy to talk to other children at school, but would stand her ground on a hopscotch she had drawn, at the risk of having her hair pulled. She spent her fourth birthday musing about death and enjoying the fact that she probably had quite a few years to go. Kat was "too sensitive", and "smart but lazy", a daydreamer, and the smallest kid in the school until grade two.

And she wasn't from the school's local neighbourhood. The other children had developed their pecking orders after school hours, in a neighborhood that looked just like the one

in the official school-board reader. Kat was shunned by the other children, who had other things to do than put up with her awkwardness on the baseball diamond. She longed for respect and acceptance from them. In those days Kat believed that the road to acceptance was to be better at things than other people. But she wasn't. No one who started in Kat's Kindergarten class ever topped the class in the ensuing years. It was always the late entries who did well in everything.

In grade seven, Kat's mother gave her permission to fight a girl twice her size who had been picking on her. The next day, Kat could hardly wait for that girl to insult her. At last some trite remark could be construed as disrespectful, and Kat played tough. She made sure that the fight would take place close to the school entrance so it would be broken up before anyone got hurt. Things went according to plan, as in ... no one was hurt. After the "fight", despite living far from each other, Kat and the girl became fast friends for the rest of the year. This was how one made one's way into the pecking order at that school.

The friendship wouldn't last through the end of elementary school, however. Kat made herself un-cool to be with by spending time with the opportunity class, a group of disadvantaged children with learning disabilities who were regularly bullied by the other children.

Kat found elementary school incredibly tedious and in many ways humiliating. Throughout this time she withdrew more and more into dreams. Teachers disapproved of her because she didn't go to church; she got the strap for daydreaming; her marks bounced to extremes; at home she surrounded herself with animals for companions. Kat's parents

worried about her.

Though in a school where boys and girls were segregated as much as possible, by age eight Kat had learned to identify with the boys because they got to do more interesting things. She admired anyone who's temporary, if hopeless rebellion brought them infamy.

Hal, from 1954

It was so hot that they could hardly breathe. Three children locked in a car outside the bingo hall waited for hours while their parents played. The youngest had long since passed out and her older sister was pinching up blue spots on her little sister's legs. Hal Solow stared out the window, breathing shallowly. He was five years old.

Hal was the first surviving child of proud Russian and Ukrainian immigrants who came to Canada with nothing after the second world war. At first they lived in Tailingville, in a section they happily joined the locals in calling "Pick Town". It was an honest mistake. These immigrants were hard workers in a Puritan land. The men took on low-paid, hard labor that none of the locals would do. The women maintained personal gardens and kept their tiny homes clean despite the challenges of poverty. As their English improved, these newcomers made the humiliating discovery that they had been victims of a racist joke. The real nickname for their tidy little ghetto was "Pig Town".

From the age of five, Hal's parents would leave him in charge of his younger siblings, often for long hours. Hal liked having power over his little sisters. He also felt good about being responsible for the fire in his family's wood stove.

He was the boy—the first born—the important child in the family. But that didn't save him from regular beatings at the hands of Yuri, his alcoholic father, or Natasha, the mother his father also abused.

While Kat was reveling in a relatively happy home life and hating school, it was the opposite for Hal. He was held to impossible standards by parents who strove to maintain their public image. Meanwhile, behind closed doors long, noisy parties kept him from sleep. Sometimes he watched his father scramble to hide the moonshine still as police pulled into their driveway. His alcoholic father, a not-so-benevolent autocrat, ruled the household with an iron fist.

For Hal, parental affection always had an emotional hook. In general, both Hal's mother and father either beat him or ignored him. Hal never knew when the blows would land or for what reason, and he could never do anything right. As his uneducated parents made futile attempts at saving face in a world that condoned racism and classism, they shared their insecurity in the deepest way. They taught Hal that he was better than other races.

The same school environment that bored and traumatized Kat proved a haven compared to his home for studious Hal. He was part of a visible minority in a school full of children, for whose parents English was a second language. But lacking his parents' thick accent, he did not suffer blatant racism from teachers.

Chapter 4

Youth

1960

"How can someone with so much excitement inside be so mediocre?"

Kat never saw herself as the smartest or prettiest teen, and the things that interested her, like math and science, were not supposed to interest the girls of her day. School took up most of her life. She found it boring and demeaning. To her chagrin Gertrude and William, Kat's parents, couldn't afford to buy her cameras or good microscopes to enjoy in her spare time.

Gert and Will were well educated for having come of age in Canada in the 40s, but reluctant to take the chances which might win them a better life. They lived in a semi-rural area surrounded by poverty and the medical text books left over from her father's abortive sojourn as a medical student.

While her parents encouraged Kat and her sister, Susan, to study, it was always with the disclaimer that they would only end up housewives anyway.

Kat's family didn't socialize as much as she would have liked, either, and when they did the children were usually excluded—normal for the day. Her parents' biggest fears seemed to be that one of their daughters might get pregnant out of wedlock or marry an alcoholic. They had moved away from the East coast to distance themselves from the alcoholism which pervaded both families.

For a while their new life seemed to be working. Gert and Will were young and full of dreams. In the beginning of their marriage they held each other on pedistals, playing roles they adopted from TV shows such as "Father Knows Best". As a young child, it warmed Kat to see them play and tease each other. But they could not ignore their legacy forever.

Gertrude was of German Jewish and Aboriginal extraction, but Kat would not learn this until the age of 21. Gert's ancestors had tried to abandon their heritage, fearing for their lives. Great Grandmother was born into a tribe which had been ordered to assimilate on pain of death. Those who refused had become victims of genocide. The Jewish line that grandfather married into had left Germany during Hitler's regime.

Gertrude was a beautiful woman who hated her clear, olive skin and avoided the sun because it tanned her to a reddish colour. She permed her straight, black hair and affected the facial expressions of glamorous movie stars.

It seemed to Kat that Gertrude either protected her children like a fierce lion or betrayed them socially in small ways to save her own face. Fortunately she was not interested in saving face with William.

William's family was equally tight-lipped about their ori-

gins. Most of his family re-spelled their Jewish last name in an attempt to be Scottish. On top of that, Will was an illegitimate child who grew up in a small town. It was a shame which he carried through his life like a cross. When Wil's family tried to launder him with a university education, they gave him the choice of being a preacher or a doctor. But Will quit after his first year of medical school with only a chemistry degree, so they disowned him and cut off all future funds.

Mimicking the tone of a Baptist minister as he wandered through their little bungalow, Will would sometimes chant in monotone, trailing off at the end,

"... and the sins of the fathers will be visited upon their children."

There were times when he seemed to want to make this prophesy come true, but Gertrude would not allow physical abuse in her presence. Since Gertude was almost always present, and Will seldom spent time with his offspring, physical abuse was not an issue.

Emotional abuse sometimes was.

One phenomenon which Kat managed to excuse herself from was the brow-beating. Two parents would flank her older sister, Sue, and torment her with questions, silly arguments and accusations until Sue broke down. As Sue worked herself into a frenzy, Kat would pace her bedroom floor, angrily pounding her fist into her hand as though slapping a baseball into a glove, repeating under her breath,

"Leave her alone! Leave her alone!"

Intervening was out of the question. No one dared confront Gertrude or Will directly. The bizarre behavior could not be interrupted.

Will and Gert tried this strange technique on Kat twice. She remained impassive, quietly agreed with their insults and refused to argue. The first time, Gert said,

"You won't get to Kat this time, Will."

The second and last time they gave up even sooner.

The passivity which Kat employed to protect herself while she was growing up might be her downfall later in life, but for now it brought some measure of peace.

Kat tried very hard to be William's friend, but he ignored her, preferring instead to complain about Gert to Sue. Will would invite Sue to sit with him in the family car, in the driveway, while he poured out his anger. The one time Will tried this with Kat she fell into her role as family mediator, thereby losing his confidence.

As a child, Kat was unsettled by Will's indifference to her. As a teen she just wished that he would go away. Will's anger toward women was as deep as his lack of self esteem. He humiliated his teenage daughters with unkind, personal comments. He was embarrassed by his attraction to Kat.

In a way, Kat was grateful that Will's sexism was administered harshly. Many young women were praised and admired by well meaning fathers, for their successful socialization as chattel. Kat described this phenomenon as "lovingly administered poison".

When Kat reached puberty, she got to be ... um ... almost the prettiest. Well it was something, if a little fake. Her long, curly, chestnut, hair had to be straightened to be stylish and she had to wear makeup to cover blond eyelashes and brows, but the large, light gray-blue eyes and tan skin were to die for. If she could stay away from chocolate her boyish figure could be dressed to look proportional. As she

matured, some called Kat beautiful, but this did not fill her with confidence.

The move to high school at age 13 was a welcome relief to Kat. Going somewhere where people don't know you can be a chance to start over socially. With this in mind, on the first day of high school Kat made friends with Jeanette, the most beautiful blond in her grade nine classroom. Jeanette turned out to be a beautiful blond who was "out", but their friendship would last until Kat's academic inconsistencies and eccentric behavior landed her in another school.

Never one to willingly do things that didn't make sense to her, Kat had failed the required grade-ten Latin course. In those days that meant that though she had 90 in math, 85 in science and 75 in English, she would have to repeat her whole year. Another option would be to continue to grade 11 in the four-year stream, in a different school. Based on the structure of the system of the time, this would severely limit her future.

Kat didn't know if she was more excited about being able to start again in another school or about having easier course work.

But after only one year in the four-year stream, Kat was back on track in her new school. Her homeroom math teacher had made a "mistake" on her report card just before accepting a new teaching position at an out of province school. Because of this, they made an exception for Kat. She could take her beloved math and physics in summer school to make up for having had, essentially, a year off. She never did have to take Latin. It felt good to have beaten the system.

Hal, the youth

Hal faced a different set of options. He remained in Kat's old school, oblivious to his reputation as a nerd, forming crushes on the most popular girls. Hal was an A-student, two years ahead of Kat. He was tall and skinny, freckled and pasty complected with thin, dirty-blond hair, cropped short. Hal could be seen crouching in the hallways of their high school with his expensive camera. Observing him from afar while still at that school, Kat had experienced fleeting envy. Girls were not allowed to join the camera club.

While Kat was just finishing grade 11, Hal graduated with a small scholarship offered by the factory in which his father worked. School officials then had to talk Hal's parents into allowing him to attend university. His parents wanted him to go directly to work to help support the family (and his father's alcoholism).

One year later, in 1967, Hal had a nervous breakdown while trying for perfection at university. Through the psychologist now at his disposal Hal learned how psychologists talk to their patients. Best of all, this young man learned that these listening techniques could help to gain a girl's confidence. His popularity soared.

It was after Hal's breakdown that he and Kat met for the first time. Kat found Hal kind of funny and interesting. Politely suppressing her curiosity about what a nervous breakdown must be like, she teased back and flirted.

But their first date was a disaster. Hal's kiss was slobbery and he was all hands. The latter was especially offensive to Kat, who had been taught to take her time—lots of time, when getting to know boys. She was all too well aware of

the way young men talked about young women who gave in. It seemed to Kat that girls were the losers all around in these relationships.

Hal would later tell Kat that he found her stupid and he was only aggressive because he should at least get something out of it after paying for two beers and gas to and from a bar.

They both quickly moved on before Kat ever even made it to legal drinking age.

Kat's First Heart Break

Sitting in the library of the local university, surrounded by books on the brain (soon to be rendered outdated by the latest research) Kat thought she had finally found peace. That she was skipping high school to be there wasn't completely out of character, though at this point she considered herself a more serious student.

Then it happened.

Kat heard a voice. She looked up. Her heart stopped.

Kat had noticed Peter before, but as with any potential crush she was happy to admire him from afar. Now a rush of adrenaline brightened her world in a way that she had never before experienced.

Peter was short and swarthy with strong features. He was bright and stimulating—a world traveler. His graceful manners seeped into her moment and she melted.

Kat's mother had always told her that this would happen and that there was only one man for each woman. Could this be him?

Peter drove Kat home. She had recently decided that Mother's admonition never to kiss a boy on a first date was outdated, but this wasn't even a date. She decided to be daring and return his kis anyway—in broad daylight!

"Your breasts feel good," he crooned.

Kat stiffened. He wasn't even touching them, at least not with his hands. This was really taking it too far!

"That's not the kind of thing you say to a girl!"

It didn't feel respectful, at least not in the way that Kat had been taught to expect respect.

Now it was Peter's turn to be shocked.

"Who CARES if it's not the kind of thing you say to a girl?"

Peter was 22–years old and in his second year of university. He had already daringly (for the day) lived with women from time to time, felt only minor irritation with 17-year-old Kat's small-town attitudes. It took a whole three rides home for him to find her not worth his time.

Peter left Kat with a pain she had never felt before. Sometimes at night she would wonder how anyone could feel that much pain and live! The pain wasn't there before she met him, and then there had been "no Peter". Now there was "no Peter" again. Why was there pain?

Along with her suffering Kat was curious. She wanted to understand this pain. She made a pact with herself never to make a permanent commitment to someone just because it felt kind of good to cuddle with him. Almost any guy could feel good to cuddle. Unless it was this strong and interesting, she reasoned, it couldn't be the real thing.

Like many on the cusp of sexual liberation, Kat believed that if she'd slept with Peter he would have stayed.

Freedom and Choices

1969

School counselors told her that if a woman studied the sciences she would never get into field research. They said that the most she could hope for was to be someone's lab back-up. Kat believed them.

None the less, university proved to be a lot more fun than high school for Kat. No small part of that was the abundance of young men she found there. Having allowed her dream of being a research scientist to be derailed she found nothing left to take seriously. Her habit of scraping by in the arts with minimum effort left lots of time for part-time jobs and socializing. As the pain of her connection to Peter faded, Kat collected dates for no other reason than to enjoy them.

In retrospect, Kat would say that her early 20s were generally good to her. In most areas she felt deliciously free. A thinly disguised geek, she used up the money from her many after-school jobs to go on science field trips in the summer. The marks in her arts major would climb back into the A's in time for graduation.

Once a friend nominated Kat to represent her university in a beauty contest for SCUBA divers, held in Steelton. Everyone thought she would win until she used her speech to criticize the state of the waters of the local lakes. They created a third place for Kat because they couldn't ignore her but didn't want to give credibility to her speech.

Some years later, in a media event, a mayor of nearby Steelton would dip his glass into the waters of Steelton Harbor and drink, to prove its safety. From the testimony of friends who dove in the harbor, Kat knew that had he dipped

it a little deeper it would have come up full of little, white worms which covered the whole bottom of the harbor to a depth of about two feet. Perhaps the worms were helping the ecosystem.

At the age of 20, Kat also met Shawn, her first real boyfriend.

Shawn was a delightful child-friend whom Kat would date for two years. Neither questioned the other's freedom to follow their own interests, including Kat's wanderlust. Shawn was a traditional gentleman, raised by Nova Scotian parents. Kat curbed her penchant for babbling on about science when they were together.

After spending a year together, Kat and Shawn made love for the first time and from that moment, it seemed, at every opportunity. The final shackles had been shed. They met on the tennis courts and in bed.

Then the party was over. It was Kat who changed.

Chapter 5

The Rape

1971

"There's a girl at the desk and she's beautiful."

The clerk returned with her manager, who eyed Kat and asked her to turn around a few times. A bar manager had been complaining that the young women Manpower sent over weren't good-looking enough.

One week later, Kat had added a job serving in a bar to the part time jobs she already juggled.

At 21, Kat considered herself fortunate. By now she had three, $1.00-an-hour jobs, which she worked at after school and even between classes. The money from these jobs would not be enough to pay her tuition, but it could supplement the subsidized student travel that took place over the summer when employment for girls was harder to find.

This job was in an isolated bar at the north end of Gardenville, on the southern peninsula. It was not without its drawbacks. For example, to compensate for the exceedingly loud music she wore ear plugs. She also didn't have trans-

portation home from work and always had to find rides home with other employees.

Kat had worked the regular weekend crowd for two weeks when she was called in for the salesman's party. For the first time, getting a ride home after work was a problem. A law requiring employers to see female employees home safely at night was seldom enforced, and Kat lived five kilometers from the site. At the end of the evening, a clean-cut young man in a seersucker jacket joined the party. When it ended at 1:00 am, he offered her a ride home.

Gardenville was a small city nestled between two lakes, which were joined by a River. In the 50s, many Europeans settled there to help build the canal. It was a hardworking town where most people lived measured lives in a mosaic of cultures, happy just to be well fed and housed. When the bars closed, the streets emptied.

As the young man drove Kat through the empty streets he told her that he had just stepped off a plane from Germany, and that he wasn't actually a guest at the party. He started to speed. Then he swerved left and crossed the canal.

"That's not the way," said Kat. "You have to go back."

The car sped up and zig-zagged through unfamiliar streets.

He looked at her coolly:

"Want me to stop?"

"Yes, Please stop!"

The young man pulled abruptly on to a path sheltered by some trees.

Kat reached for the door and got it part way open, but in an instant he was on top of her slapping her face.

"Get your pants off ..."

Everything she'd learned about self protection only seemed

to make him mad. In the end, his arms were longer and he was stronger.

Over the coming years this memory would bury itself in anger and humiliation. No, it was too much. But at least she finally got away. It could have been a lot worse.

The Escape

Kat was lost. That side of the canal was foreign to her. Anyway, the worm was finished for now.

"Now I'll take you home."

Kat had already almost escaped twice. Each time the physical abuse increased. She remained glued to the seat, her best pants in tatters, as he started the car. Would he run it into her if she got out? Better to wait until there were some people around.

They continued along the wrong side of the canal.

"So, how long have you been raping girls?"

Kat was trying to make calm conversation in the face of a bad situation.

"I didn't rape you."

"OK, um ... So, how long have you been doing whatever it was that you just did?"

'... this wasn't going well. Better leave it.'

But she was able to engage him in conversation. Part way through the ride he even held out his hand for her to shake it, saying, "You're all right. Friends?"

She did not respond or shake his hand.

At last they were crossing the canal again. Kat saw a familiar intersection and there was a car at it! The young man sped around the corner away from Gardenville, in the

opposite direction to Kat's house. For a split second she considered how she would roll as she hit the pavement. Then the door was open, held open by her foot right in front of a whole car full of people.

The young man screeched to a stop, swore at her as she jumped out and screeched away. Squinting through tear-filled eyes, Kat tried in vain to see the license number. She waved her arms at the car still waiting at the stoplight. The light changed and the car drove away.

On the other side of the street Kat saw a young man. He greeted her affably enough.

"What are you ripped on?" he asked.

"Not ripped! Raped ... as in taken by force!"

The young man turned on his heal and walked away.

In the course of her three mile walk home, Kat saw one other car and a police car. Both ignored her wild attempts to get their attention.

She arrived home at 4:00 am.

The Police

Kat shook her sister gently to wake her. Susan and Kat had shared a room since babyhood and they were pretty good friends.

"Susan, I've been raped."

"That's disgusting. Wake me up at 9 and we'll go to the police station."

Susan rolled over.

Shortly after 9:00 the following morning, Susan and a sleepless Kat were greeted by the police with a snide,

"We have what *MIGHT* be a rape here."

With only a few, small bruises about the throat they weren't going to feel sorry for her. They told Kat it was her fault and treated her like a criminal. They told her that she shouldn't complain because a girl had come in two days ago with a torn vagina. They didn't find that guy either.

"I know you won't be able to find this guy based on what I can tell you. I'm just here to file a report so that someday I might be able to help someone else to identify him."

The police were annoyed. They didn't need the extra work, but now they had to take down the information and investigate the scene.

When Kat got home the police had already informed her mother. Gert grabbed Kat by the shoulders, shook her and told her that if Gert's marriage to Kat's father went on the rocks, this would be the reason. Kat knew her mother was just not thinking straight. In any case, mother later apologized.

Years later, when her mother finally told her father, he responded,

"Now I know why she is the way she is." ... whatever that meant.

Susan told Kat how Devil's Voice motorcycle gang members would clean up one of their members, who would then go out and pick up a girl. The girl would be brought back to their club house in the city adjoining Gardenville and raped—sometimes killed. That was as close to an absolution as Kat would come.

Of course, Kat lost her job.

She went to a doctor to make sure that she hadn't contracted some horrible disease.

"So, you think he's been out raping bad girls, do you?"

the doctor glibly joked.

By now Kat was numb to insensitivity.

She told her boyfriend, Shawn, because he had a right to know.

"Oh, ... oh ..." he said, with a look of mock outrage.

Then Shawn kept on bopping, expecting Kat to be the old Kat and just have fun. What was he supposed to do?

... And then it was all over, kind of. There were no rape crisis lines in those days.

For about a year, Kat had flashbacks.

The rape seemed like a surreal sequence of happenings. It showed Kat what a frontier society she lived in, and that no one *really* cares about anyone else. It showed her that you can't depend on the social structures that are supposed to be there to protect us.

Kat did her fourth year university thesis on Surrealism because it felt more real than "reality".

She left Shawn and opened the door for someone like Hal.

Chapter 6

The "Courtship"

1972

Susan and her friends were always commenting on how Hal would hang around different venues watching Kat. Kat was unaware of Hal's presence as he leaned in doorways or against walls. She hadn't even thought about Hal in five years. She was flattered when sue told her this. Kat had never heard of stalking.

Tall and lean with a cool-cat air, Hal had become somewhat handsome despite his pasty complexion. He was a philosophy major, but Kat wouldn't hold that against him just because she was a displaced science snob.

Kat started looking out for Hal looking out for her. When they connected, Hal played the kindly big brother. She was as needy as most of the women he managed to charm. Kat admired Hal, and now that she was willing to sleep with him she thought it might last for more than one date. By her reckoning she had already lost one guy because of her parents' antiquated ideas, and Shawn had left her an expe-

rienced woman, after all.

One day when Kat was working at one of her many after school jobs, Hal came through the library turnstile she was monitoring. To Kat the moment felt socially awkward. Her body felt weak. She could barely lift her head, barely say the words, but Kat propositioned Hal. The response was immediate. An hour later they were parked in Hal's car and Kat was discovering that men could be quite different from one another. It was not romantic. There was no show of affection from Hal. He ended it when the confines of a car proved too awkward, and then dropped a confused Kat off at home.

Two days later Hal called Kat. He paid for a motel room where they spent the night. This time it worked out better, but Kat noticed that unlike Shawn Hal lacked any affection or spontaneity. He used her efficiently, once at night and once in the morning, and then drove her home. Even then he made a point of shaking her confidence with his offhand remarks. There was no feeling of connection. Kat decided never to see him again.

But rejecting him kept Hal around, kind of.

Hal was not like other guys. For one thing, he had never seemed to be dating anyone. Even before Kat and Hal became involved you would never, ever have said, "There go Hal and his girlfriend," though he still managed to break a few hearts. And Kat didn't get special treatment, she got Hal treatment. Hal would act sweet and sensitive just long enough to rekindle some hope in his prey.

Once Hal introduced Kat to an older woman on campus. To Kat's discomfort, the woman said:

"I've met so many of your friends!"

Another time someone asked Hal and Kat if they were a couple. Hal quickly responded,

"... a couple of what?"

When they walked together, Hal always walked a little too fast for Kat to keep up.

To complicate things further for Kat, there was Maria. Maria was a cute Italian girl who (unlike Kat) knew how to flirt without looking stupid. Unlike Kat she also had quite a following whom she toyed with and kept at arms length. Hal was one of them. Hal had memorized Maria's license plate number. He would drive around scanning the parking lots where her car was often found.

In his diary, Hal wrote,

"This is the one woman whom I could never just use."

Sometimes Kat would decide to leave Hal. Every time she started to move away from him emotionally he would increase his efforts to keep her around. When she responded he played on her sense of unworthiness and began the dance again.

Once Kat was invited to Montreal by a professor. She had heard that this prof. bragged about how easy it was to 'pick off' the young freshman women, but an offer to see the French side of Montreal was too hard to resist, and you never know ... Hal had recently pushed her away so she felt that there was nothing holding her. Within a day of her arrival, however, Hal showed up in Montreal! He visited her hotel room long enough to make it look as if they were together, leaving a somewhat depressed professor without a date. Kat, ever the naive optimist, only found this confusing.

Though they weren't an item, Hal also showed up for Kat's total immersion French courses at the University of

Montreal. For the whole six weeks he played with her head just enough to get her attention and then spent a lot of time with the other young women.

Their sexual involvement ended long before they joined the cult, but Hal's emotional dance around Kat would continue for years.

Many years later when trying to make sense of it all, Kat would tell a professional that she thought Hal's need to hide her even after their marriage meant that she must have embarrassed him. Her therapist responded,

"From what I know of you both it was because if you are not there, he can say anything he wants about you and no one will know the difference."

It fit. Kat remembered the words of the cult member she had once traveled with—the only one she really got to know:

"You are definitely misunderstood in the group."

How could all these people who didn't even know her misunderstand her?

Another friend who had left the cult told Kat that much of Hal's credibility at the time had come from his association with her.

Based on her experience in the cult, Kat found it hard to believe that she'd had any credibility at all. Women had to marry important men in the cult to even know that certain privileges existed.

The Cult

1974

In 2006, the Suncity Times newspaper would introduce a new priest, recently ordained in Capitol City's "Church of

Only One Way". When Kat knew this priest in 1974, he was a tall, handsome fellow, heir to a wealthy grandmother in Gatedmount, and a good friend of Hal. Kat remembered him as one who progressed through a series of women, leaving each to marry the next when he got a new girl pregnant. Then this priest would try to get out of child support for the previous one. He and Hal used to get together to think up ways for him to get out of child support. The priest's most recent wife, though half his age, remained childless. Perhaps she was smarter than the others. Perhaps he had gained some self control.

Kat thought that the article was misleading in other areas as well, from what she knew as an insider. For example, there was no hint of the cult-like behavior she had witnessed.

Suncity was quite a distance from Capitol City, but Kat was aware that one church member had had already moved from there to follow this new monk. Hal had mentioned to his sons that he was buying an apartment building in Suncity, though such transactions always took place through his numbered company to avoid detection by the government.

Suncity was not far from Kat's country property, but she knew she would not be reestablishing her connection to Hal's Church.

To be fair, Kat had to admit that no one had forced her to join the church. Hal had introduced and encouraged her, but her decision to move to Capitol City in 1974 had been all her own. The Church screened people first to see if they were candidates—like a hypnotist who won't have unhypnotizable subjects ruin his show.

Like most people who are drawn to such a group, Kat had been vulnerable and feeling unbalanced. She thought this

religion might be one way to see past her own limitations. In some ways the Church would eventually become her family.

Hal joined at the same time as Kat. He told people at the cult that before he joined the group he was considering taking his own life, and with it the lives of anyone who would be hurt by his passing. He said the Church had saved him.

Life at the cult could be hard, but it was safe. Church elders encouraged members to become very tired, and in that state reminded them of their mortality. Their efficient, military approach left little time for socialization, but members were encouraged to charm newcomers. Everything one did had only one stated goal—enlightenment. Nothing one did was ever enough to achieve it.

With time and brainwashing, Kat and Hal would be important players in the group, though not as a couple. Hal became the house leader, Kat the head cook. Neither really had the personality type that drew in members, at first. Hal would learn how to affect that personality through sales and business training later on.

Kat found that the Church was an engaging and mind-broadening experience in some ways. The guru was versed on many different topics, and could be an interesting speaker. However, in the end group-think wasn't for Kat.

On top of that, Kat found Capitol City crowded, noisy and dirty. After a year of intense training and indoctrination, Kat left the Capitol to house-sit an isolated farm house owned by another Church member. She would remain there for one year. In the fall and spring, Church members visited her for a day at a time, finding it a little too rustic for an overnight stay.

At the farm, Kat spent her days painting its beautiful

surroundings. Living on a diet of cornmeal and beans, she rose with the sun and painted all day. Then she slept peacefully under a heavy pile of quilts. Kat cross-country skied for two kilometers to the nearest village when the the cornmeal and beans ran low.

Winter was lonely. After a month of isolation the sound of a snowmobile in the distance became an exciting reason to run to the window. Kat realized that the solitary life of a monk was not for her, so when her sister told her about employment in Shangraton, Kat moved again to start a career.

Throughout her wanderings, Kat didn't give up the group and the Church of the Only One Way did not give her up. She continued to attend week-long retreats, also attended by Hal. Church members, including Hal, were regular visitors to her tiny apartment in Shangraton. One supposed monk even became her boyfriend for a month. The head guru from the States easily talked him out of that. He would also talk this monk out of each subsequent girlfriend. Kat got over the rejection quickly, but her involvement with someone else really seemed to shake up Hal.

In response, Hal became an even more regular visitor to Shangraton. He would boast to everyone that he was going to see Kat. He even offered to help Kat pick out a car she was planning to buy. Kat trustingly handed over some cash and he bought her an old Volvo. Shortly after that, Kat noticed that church members were treating her differently. There was a spark in their eye when Hal's name came up, and they would glance over at her. He had told them that he bought her a car. Those who actually spoke to Kat about it were surprised to learn that it was her money that had paid for the car.

Hal also never stopped playing head games, though his relationship with Kat was platonic. He treated her to his emotional roller coaster during visits to Shangraton. Kat likened their friendship more to an addiction than affection, and once even suggested that they not see one another at all.

At last, with her career blossoming and just when she felt that she could purge her life of Hal, he asked her to come to Capitol City to live with him at the Church house. The Master of the group suggested that it would be good to have a couple at the house. Hal assured Kat that he had $25,000.00 in the bank and a great business going on. That's why *he* couldn't come to live with *her*. Kat gave up a promising career to move to Capitol City, work with the guru, live with Hal, and freelance as a writer.

When she arrived, there was no $25,000.00 in the bank. Hal wasn't even employed except for his free room and board as leader of the Church house. Kat paid her own rent, paid the banks $1000 to get them off Hal's back, did the head cook's job at the group house, and paid for Hal's training in a software field. She was sure that someone so respected by the Church would only improve his life.

Later, Kat would say:

"We never courted. He just played me."

For now, at least she didn't have to fight her psychological addiction to him.

The Wedding

1982

There is a deciduous smell in the south. It hadn't occurred to Kat before that the smell of deciduous trees could be more than the absence of pine. It reminded her that she had always been aware of it without noticing it. It brought back feelings of security from her childhood, a stark contrast to what was to come.

Kat's first year in Capitol City was a financial struggle. As a partner Hal was characteristically distant, though tolerably kind in the presence of fellow cult members. Maria and Hal continued to see each other from time to time. By now Hal had lost his beard and leather jacket, and looked almost respectably middle class. He had even taken Kat's (and earlier, his mother's) advice about wearing deodorant.

After exactly one year, Hal proposed. The the Master Guru came up from the States to marry them. Kat made her own wedding dress out of creamy cotton and inexpensive lace. Their friend, Laila, did the the flowers, and decorated a broad-brimmed hat with silk flowers for Kat. Hal wore his dark suit and tie. They would marry in a church hall full of Japanese zaphus and tans.

Before long, happy wedding guests were flowing through the door of the Church of the Only One Way. Two sets of parents who had wondered if their children would ever marry arrived at this most unusual environment. The walls were beige. Except for a spray of flowers on the altar, everything else in the room was some shade of brown. Men and women in saffron, white and brown kimonos herded colourfully dressed guests through clouds of incense and into the

wedding hall.

As guests settled into their places so that the wedding could begin, one of the organizers hurried into the hall.

"Hal's father is outside refusing to take off his shoes!"

Yuri stood stiffly at the front door complaining that it was beneath his dignity to enter wearing only socks. Eventually, soft-spoken members of the Church talked him into leaving his shoes in the doorway like the other guests. Yuri, the last to enter the hall, glowered in humiliation as the Master Guru married his only son in a church that wasn't Russian Greek Orthodox.

The wedding was over almost as soon as it had begun. Relatives took wedding pictures on Church grounds before heading for a potluck reception at the local park. Except for the absence of alcohol it was now starting to resemble a traditional wedding. There were presents. The bride and groom cut the wedding cake. Relatives took more pictures.

Everything ended with Kat and Hal cleaning up after everyone else. At two o'clock am, with the work done, Hal rustled through the wedding presents asking,

"Which one is from Maria?"

Maria was the only person Hal had ever been on time to meet, the only one he was ever nervous around and the only invited guest who had not come.

Two days later Kat reminded him that marriages also had to be consummated to be legal. In robotic fashion, Hal complied.

Within days of the wedding Hal insisted on moving out of the group house. They traded a house they had bought earlier as a joint business venture for their first home in Burbcity.

Hal's verbal abuse began the day they moved in. Initially, Kat countered with,

"Why can't you ever say anything positive, Hal? You're treating me like your father treats your mother and I don't like it."

"All right," he replied curtly. "I like it that you're working. I like your shoes. I like it when you don't spill anything in the kitchen. Are you happy?"

No witnesses ... But he seemed to be so well respected everywhere!

Kat excused much of Hal's unpleasant behavior and sexism as a cultural phenomenon. Sexism seemed so antiquated as a concept, to Kat, that it hadn't occurred to her that a bright person like Hal would not eventually see through it. She hoped he would make peace with her need for independence, and that she could learn to accept his erratic behavior.

From the time that they moved out of the group house, Hal's schedule became VERY erratic. He would sometimes call from another city at nine pm, to remind Kat that he hadn't shown up for the meals she'd prepared. The reasons he gave varied. Sometimes he was busy trying to get rich. Sometimes he just ended up at his mother's house in a different city. Sometimes he was visiting Maria. If Kat complained, she was put down as an insecure woman.

When he *was* home Kat would sometimes just look at him, enjoying the soft feeling that came with having a person to spend her life with. At first the long absences felt a little lonely, but Kat rationalized that at least she could get to sleep before the snoring started. Anyway, by this time she had her old career back, now in the Capitol City Region. Kat was too busy, herself, to consider cramping Hal's style.

Kat put Hal through computer school so that he could find real employment. After finishing his course he went to work on a get-rich-quick scheme with an old friend. Two years later when Kat was about to have their first son, Hal was using Kat's money to try to get rich on real estate. Of course it didn't work because you have to stay in one place long enough for the building you are living in to increase in value. She let him have his fun, believing that he would give her the space to follow her own dreams when the time came. She reasoned that the fewer boundaries she placed on him, the fewer he had a right to place on her.

Anyway, Hal knew better than to yell at her or raise his hand. Years of warnings from her mother left no room in Kat's life for physical abuse. Her response would have been swift and sure, especially with no children to bind them together.

Kat made it clear that she valued sensitivity. In response Hal told her about how he cried in a tree when he was young, while his father butchered a chicken.

Hal's family was another interesting challenge. Yuri disowned Hal because of the choice of church for the wedding. A month later when Hal still hadn't joined the Russian Greek Orthodox Church, Natasha helped to reunite father and son.

Natasha usually did whatever Yuri said. She nagged relentlessly, powerless to influence her family to come to the table before supper could cool, knowing that they would blame her if it did. She nagged Hal to wear deodorant. She nagged Yuri about his stinky feet. She talked endlessly, annoyingly, and without encouragement, about everything, until Yuri's low, threatening voice brought sudden silence with the words,

"Be Quiet."

At first Natasha treated Kat like a princess. That all changed suddenly and dramatically one day and Kat found herself the ongoing target of anger and emotional abuse. When she asked Hal what she might have done to deserve this, he shrugged.

"You're part of the family now, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Welcome to the family."

Chapter 7

Perfect Little Family

Never far from a hospital and under the gentle tutelage of midwives, Kat would have all of her babies home. This ensured detailed pre-natal monitoring by both a midwife and a doctor, a natural birth in an environment which the baby would not have to leave, and an uninterrupted bonding period for mother and babe. Her babies were alert and responsive from the moment of birth. Kat did not suffer from postpartum depression with any of the births, a blessing which she credited to the ongoing emotional support and sisterly care of her midwives.

Jon

Jon was an unusual child, bright to a fault and refreshing in his ability to forgive anyone's impatience with his sometimes wild behavior. He was fully engaged in the moment and determined to have his own way. Jon was as full of promise as he was exhausting. Kat sometimes remarked that he was

like one raw nerve, especially after his vaccinations.

Kat dreaded the vaccinations. For days afterwards Jon would swell and scream. In years to come, mandatory vaccinations would be started much later than at three months of age. When Jon was a baby Kat was torn. This was supposed to protect children but now she was hearing about children who died soon after their shots. Reading actual statistics and the origins of the anti-vax movement would later make her feel good about the decision to vaccinate, but at this point she was having doubts. Hal expressed his usual indifference.

Jon was remarkably beautiful and outgoing. To the chagrin of many adults, he seemed to pick up everyone's behavior, magnify it and play it back. He did not see adults as superior, or other children as groups to be accepted by. In the playground, Jon might be seen leading a string of children through the equipment, but he was never led. He usually didn't even join a group. Intellectual, often hyper, and physically awkward, Jon usually made a place for himself on his own terms—eventually.

It was on a teacher's recommendation that Kat decided to home-school Jon. He was given labels such as ADD, ADHD and Asberger Syndrome. Since it was standard procedure to drug children like Jon to make them settle down in class, homeschooling seemed like the compassionate alternative. Ritalin, a form speed, was the drug of choice for unruly children. While still in her teens, Kat had witnessed a friend's suffering as she kicked an addiction to speed. This was not a risk she was willing to take in the name of making Jon fit in.

Again, Hal did not question the homeschooling. He didn't seem to care either way. He told Kat that he was probably

like Jon when he was young, but his parents had beaten it out of him. He advised Kat to beat it out of Jon.

When challenged on such statements, Hal always told Kat that he was just kidding. It was pointless to challenge him on anything. In any case, Kat believed that without her acquiescence no harm would come to Jon. Without realizing it she had already fallen into her old role of mediating with a father. Kat felt comfortable balancing the energy of angry men.

Balancing act

Working after having a baby wasn't as easy as Kat had hoped it would be. Jon screamed unrelentingly in the absence of his parents, especially in the absence of Kat. Hal left the baby with anyone who would take him, including Hal's abusive parents. This made it harder for Kat, who was the sole provider for the family. She didn't want baby-Jon to suffer. When Kat arrived home, Hal would deposit the baby in her arms before she could get her coat off, and rush out the door, to return after midnight.

The solution to Jon's impetuousness seemed obvious to both Hal's and Kat's families. Hal's family advised beating the child and leaving him to cry. Kat's family advised drugging him.

Kat couldn't believe that these were the only alternatives. She turned to the LaLeche League for advice, and the compassionate company of other mothers. In the beginning, Jon had trouble latching on to nurse. In the days before Doodahs, this had made the League a necessary first contact anyway.

Kat was surprised at how professional the League was. Communications training for a LaLeche League leader rivaled training Kat had seen offered to top government officials. The League's extensive library and research resources provided up-to-date medical and child rearing information. Best of all, the League encouraged child-centred compassion.

With Hal gone more and more, leaving Kat to tend to the baby through the night, sleeping in the same bed with the baby was survival. She had to be on her way to work by seven o'clock am. In the early morning, Hal was back long enough to distract Jon so that Kat could get to work. On weekends, Kat was stranded without a car, alone with the baby, but at least she could try to follow the baby's biological patterns to get some rest for herself.

While at work, Kat often slipped into the washroom to pump milk for Jon and relieve the tightness in her breasts. The freezer at home filled up with frozen breast milk as Jon waited to nurse in person.

Sometimes Hal would show up at Kat's work with Jon. He would leave Kat and Jon in an underground parking lot throughout Kat's lunch hour, giving himself a break. Jon would nurse for up to 15 minutes. Kat would spend the rest of the hour entertaining him in a parked car. She was happy to see Jon, but this venue was exhausting.

Sometimes Hal would be waiting in the car with the baby as Kat got off work. He would drop Kat and Jon off at home and immediately drive away.

Kat burned out just as an important contract ended. At last, with great relief to mother, father and child, Kat stayed home full time.

Hal said that the baby calmed right down when Kat left

her job.

There was no income at all for a month when Kat stopped providing for the family. Then Hal began his real career—the one Kat had paid to have him trained for.

The Move

Three years after the birth of Jon, Kat was pregnant again. Again they moved just before the birth a child—this time to Festiville, 200 km away.

Festiville was a small city in 1989 when Kat and Hal arrived. It had grown up fast around a prison at a crossroad, but maintained its small-town atmosphere. Kat was constantly reminded by people who had been there for a while that in Festiville things moved more slowly. This was a relief.

Festiville was also a major shopping centre for a cluster of small, local communities. Because of this, stores in Festiville held a wider variety of products than those in most small cities. As Capitol City expanded north, Festiville became more frenetic, but the traditional power structures and attitudes of a small town remained.

There was a great deal of poverty in Festiville. People who had never had much to begin with found themselves unable to pay the ever increasing taxes. Even as the GDP index rose and the media praised Festiville as a place where employment could be found, shelters for the homeless could not keep up with increasing demands. Many of the people who had to accept the low-paid jobs available to them were forced live in those shelters. Food banks were running out of food.

As the population exploded, opportunities for those in the software industry increased. But it was the escalating cost of real estate that interested Hal. Kat and Hal bought a house in Festiville. Then Hal gave up the highly-paid local opportunities that presented themselves in favor of commuting to work in Capitol City. He mortgaged the house he shared with Kat to buy a mortgage-free house in only his name, out-of-province. Had they ended the marriage at that time, Hal would have walked with that house and half of the house they lived in. Fortunately for Kat, the laws would change before he left. They each got a house.

Though Hal had worked himself into a reasonable salary by this time, money was always in short supply. He bragged that he turned his whole pay cheque over to Kat. The problem for Kat was that he had already spent it. From time to time Hal would angrily accuse Kat of over spending and insist that they sit down together to go over expenses. This bullying tactic ended abruptly each time as it became obvious that income drifted through Hal's hands in sometimes un-explainable ways.

Hal had no trouble convincing outsiders that he, Kat and Jon formed a perfect little family, though most of his friends didn't even know Kat was pregnant until after David's birth. To the few who knew, Hal said:

"When Kat has our second child I'll have to be around a lot to help. That's why I'm going to see my relatives in Russia now."

It was typical of Hal to abandon his family during the third trimester of each pregnancy and travel to some distant place. With Jon, it had been out West, but Kat was healthy then. Leaving her alone, sick at home with a new baby,

seemed worse somehow. She really hadn't thought that Hal would abandon her in that condition.

In retrospect Kat sometimes had a hard time forgiving herself. How could she believe Hal's lies a second time?

Hal left Kat for Russia two weeks before the baby was to be born and returned to find Kat suffering from pneumonia. Right after the baby was born he took a week off work, ostensibly to help out. Then he spent that week in Capitol City, leaving Kat and the boys alone. Again, it was LaLeche League to the rescue!

"I know you don't know me well. I'm new in town but I was wondering if you would mind coming over for a little while and bringing your son to play with Jon. I have a brand new baby and I can't get off the couch. My four-year-old is having a hard time."

The morning after the arrival of his little brother, Jon was confused and hyperactive.

Women came to help Kat. Strangers brought their children to play with Jon, made tea for Kat and helped her to the bathroom. Pneumonia had left her weak, and she was so sore from coughing that she couldn't get up by herself.

The LaLeche League provided more than instruction on how to give a baby a good start in life. For Kat it was instant friends and instant, compassionate networking for a new mum in a new location. It wasn't a *real* extended family. In some ways it was better.

Luckily, David was a serene baby. Kat and Jon would manage.

But now Hal had one more child to compete with for control of Kat. By this time it was starting to dawn on Kat that things were easier for everyone when Hal was not

around.

David

David sat in the back seat of the car drawing faces and bursting into laughter as each was completed. A professional cartoonist might work hard to create the variety of expressions in those faces. Two-year-old Dave produced them in an instant, one after another. Later that year during a trip to Shangraton Dave included a nose for the first time and proudly showed the picture to his cousin.

"It has a pig nose," she responded.

After that, Dave stopped drawing until he reached his teens.

David was the baby who cried in sympathy at the suffering of another child. As he grew, his face showed every emotion. He loved to help people in need, but felt burned out when his caring actions were not returned. He was tolerant of people's dysfunction, but slow to forgive overt transgressions against himself or others.

David consistently chose friends who were at least two years older than himself. While they accepted him and called him their best friend, the discrepancy in educational level and cognitive development as they grew through some stages often left sensitive Dave feeling less clever or skilled than his peers.

Dave seemed to be popular with his peers, but he never saw it that way. While his friends jostled one another for their place in the pecking order, Dave internalized everything. He longed to share the deepest recesses of his soul with another human being close to his own age.

When Hal first left the family, visitation was at best an inconvenience, and at worst, traumatic for the children. Eventually, like Kat, David would come to enjoy and admire Hal's knowledge and wit. Unlike Kat, David would never come to know how well Hal's witty statements were rehearsed, how often repeated, or how carefully he controlled his audience.

It didn't matter. Hal would gain David's trust only to lose it through broken promises and lies—and gain it again when enough time passed for him to forget earlier transgressions.

Of all the boys, Kat thought David would benefit most from a male mentor, but none came.

Boundaries

Boundaries. Hal had none. Usually this manifested as criticism of others even as he broke rules to suit his own purpose. From the beginning of their relationship Kat had felt her own shaky boundaries falling away. The cult encouraged one to stretch beyond one's comfort zone. Since the rape, nothing had really felt comfortable for her.

So when Hal kept strange hours or didn't respond predictably to the day-to-day life of a family, that became the new norm. Hal told Kat he was out making money. Every year he reassured her that next year they would be rich.

Susan said, "Don't be surprised if when he dies a whole other family shows up making claims."

Weekends were the worst. At first Kat hated weekends. Everyone else was spending time with their families. She felt trapped at home, alone with a young baby and demanding

toddler. There was no car to take them anywhere, and no one but Kat to meet everyone's needs.

It was in the midst of such a weekend that Kat suddenly realized how far things had gone. At midnight, amid the howls of a colicky baby, with a screaming four-year-old clawing at her leg, she finally had her epiphany.

Only that afternoon Hal had boasted to Kat about a woman at work who was after him. He reminded her that after the birth of her second child she *was* a little overweight.

Through the chaos of crying children she heard herself say,

"What do you do when you wake up in the middle of something like this?"

This time, after finally settling the children, Kat waited up.

At four am, Hal sauntered in. Kat met him at the door.

"Hal, I know you weren't working until four am. You sleep all day. Your kids don't even know you."

"I need a social life. If you weren't so boring I wouldn't have to do this kind of thing."

"We were invited to the Midwives' party. They have husbands you could talk to. You refused."

"You have boring friends. You are boring and you have boring friends."

"Your boys don't even know you. I'm all they have. They need a father."

"So I'm the jerk?"

Hal stood up and strode into the bedroom where he laid on his stomach. Kat followed and touched his back.

Hal spoke first.

"I feel guilty about bullying Jon."

"Then you'll work on this?"

He paused again and took a deep, impatient breath.

"I always thought that the good thing that came out of my nervous breakdown was that it made me a really nice guy!," he said with an accusing tone.

Hal had a way of turning everything around.

"Get some sleep, Hal."

It was as hopeless as every other exchange with Hal. If you confronted him he took you in circles.

By now Kat knew that the marriage was in jeopardy. If only things could stay somewhat on track until the boys were older ...

Chapter 8

The Final Turning Point

It was 8:00 pm. Hal called from the West coast where he was on a business trip.

"Talk me through sex."

Kat had heard the drunken giggles of women in the background when Hal called from previous business trips. One had even yelled into the phone.

Asking Kat to talk him through sex was new.

This time it was quiet in the background, but Kat doubted if he was alone. Though it felt uncomfortable, she complied. By now she was thinking, "Better there than here ..."

Intimacy with Hal had become a wifely chore—something her mother had told her she legally had to do. In fact, some archaic Federal law still held that doctrine!

Hal still bullied and humiliated her while promising future wealth and freedom, but all that had rung hollow for some time. Kat no longer admired Hal's intelligence. She knew that it was only a matter of time before they would part, but didn't want the children to grow up in poverty.

It was three years after the birth of David, and just after her mother died, that Kat found herself to be to be three months pregnant with a third child. Lying in the bathtub after one of his late night forays, Hal said nothing on receiving the news, but quietly smirked.

Only a week before, Kat had been talking to Joan, Hal's most recent mistress.

"You'd better watch him. He wasn't working late when he was at my house night after night," she warned.

But neither could imagine what he did after leaving Joan's apartment at 1:30 am to arrive home at four in the morning.

Oh, he had his alibi and a guilt gift—a small rug he'd spent the whole night picking out.

And now Kat was having another baby. The more vulnerable Kat became, the more Hal upped the ante.

It was then that Hal first suggested that Jon watch his parents have sex "to show him how".

Kat recoiled in horror. Hal responded calmly as he always did when he realized that he'd gone too far:

"I was just kidding."

But it wasn't the last time he would request this.

Even within the bizarre context of what her marriage had become—the dysfunction she had embraced, her acquiescence to Hal's 'lifestyle', this felt despicable. Kat knew that she and the children had to get away.

If the marriage was over at least her third son made it in under the wire, though midwives told her that she probably wouldn't survive another pregnancy. But what could she do for the even the ones she had, now?

Kat started therapy.

Relief

Cassandra was the therapist. She knew all about abusive relationships. She knew how they could sneak up on you and how two people could see the same interaction differently. She knew how one could give oneself away, piece by piece. She also knew that some elements must have felt normal to Kat for this to have gone so far.

Her first words to pregnant Kat were,

"You are in a no-win situation."

Hearing these words was a relief. Being believed was a relief. Gaining the tools to resist Hal's games was a relief.

Cassandra gave Kat books to read and the learning journey began. Even as Hal did his best to discourage therapy, Kat dove in voraciously.

It didn't solve the problem of looming child poverty. It did make Kat feel stronger.

Kat brought Hal to marriage counseling. At first he resisted. Then he charmed Cassandra. Kat was temporarily deflated by this, but it didn't take Cassandra long to gain a greater understanding of the situation. Again she empowered Kat, this time encouraging her to leave the marriage.

"... but be aware that guys like that will come back 15 years later if they think you're getting too happy," Cassandra warned.

Cassandra was a wonderful guide and later a mentor for Kat in the courts, until a car accident rendered her unable to work.

Timothy

David was fascinated by Tim. Three-year-old Dave would hold Tim's little hands and gaze into his eyes while Kat paid for groceries. He would play with the baby, giving Kat a chance to finish making lunch. If Jon spawned excitement, David brought harmony to everything, and Tim's personality seemed to land somewhere in between.

Like Jon, Timmy liked to tinker with objects. Like David, he was an easy-going child who seemed to drift serenely through events.

The addition of Tim to the family seemed to defy the laws of increasing numbers of children. Life got easier for Kat. Tim was the only one to receive chiropractic care just after his birth. Kat had read in the National News that this could prevent colic, and it seemed to work, though she knew it was only one instant, not statistically sound. With Jon's focus slowly improving, David's help with Timmy, and Hal away most of the time, the family could settle into more workable cooperation.

Hal had always made a point of refusing jobs close to home and, if in the area, made a point of getting home after the children were in bed. He left for England when Tim was a babe in arms and returned to find him walking. Tim and Hal would never pay much attention to each other.

Even Hal's brief appearances to complain, criticize, and bully seemed lost on contented Timmy at first.

Chapter 9

The Out

1995

It was warm for October. Kat and Hal strolled together hand in hand around the block. This felt weird to Kat. By now she knew that Hal was only seen in public with her when it suited some hidden purpose. After 13 years of marriage, he had only recently taken to holding her hand, of course, only in public.

"We have a business meeting coming up," said Hal. "It's in a place with private rooms and lap dancers."

Kat always knew about the lap dancing forays. Hal didn't consider that infidelity so he told her. Every neighbor they'd had since the beginning of the marriage had told her that with the hours he keeps he must be running around. By now Kat had managed some emotional distance.

"You mean that your meeting is at a bawdy house," she replied disinterestedly.

"Oh!" Hal looked shocked. "I would never have thought of that! I'm so naive! I just never think of these things!"

Hal had become much more blatant, but the air of sincerity about him when he lied was still unnerving—even if what he was saying sounded stupid.

Kat felt like she was too far in, too isolated, too concerned for the future of their three small children to leave. Where would they go?

Her hand remained frozen in his.

'We must look like the perfect couple,' she thought.

That evening Hal would ask for an open marriage and sob with gratitude when she granted it. Kat had long since given up on having a normal marriage, and this new honesty felt oddly refreshing.

"For me it might only be open until I find someone to be monogamous with," she added, feeling compelled to lay all the cards on the table in the name of honesty.

Hal pressed on.

"I've always wanted to try a menage a trois—two women and me. Maybe we could involve one of Lou's girlfriends ...

Also from the Church, Lou was one of the few of Hal's friends that Kat had met. He was a get-rich-quicker, just like Hal. Lately he'd been coming to visit a lot. When Lou came Hal would retire to the back of the house leaving him alone with Kat.

It was unusual and refreshing to have male companionship, and Lou treated Kat and the children with respect. Lou also proved to be a good companion on outings with the children.

For the first time in many grueling years Kat could feel herself having fun. Lou was homely. He was bald. He was the quintessential seedy salesman. He was a little weird, but he was nice to lonely and isolated Kat and the children.

They fell in love.

The Game

When Kat and Lou seemed to be connecting, Hal was delighted.

"YOU have a friend! YOU!" he chuckled.

"Well, what makes you think you should have all the fun," Kat preened.

At this point, Hal had been dragging Kat off to psychologist after psychologist of his choosing. The psychologists were supposed to help him to get over a woman he'd met out West and fallen in love with. When Kat entered the picture and the psychologist started saying things that Hal didn't want to hear, he would drop that psychologist and find another. One of them even told Kat to be careful and she was about to find out why.

For a few days after receiving permission to have an open marriage there was a lightness about Hal that Kat had only seen when he used to visit his old friend, Maria. But Maria was no longer in the picture, as far as Kat knew.

"So, what are the ground rules?" Kat queried. "Would it bother you if Lou and I held hands?"

"No," Hal replied.

"What if we cuddle on the coach and watch a video with the children sometime?"

"I'm OK with that."

This one bothered Kat a bit. What irrational part of her wanted him to care about that?

"What if I had sex with someone?"

"That would be OK."

"If I married someone else?"

Hal looked hurt.

"Now, that would bother me a lot."

"OK. Then I won't get married," Kat pronounced.

To have an affair would have been ambitious. Kat was a devoted mother, deeply involved in the children's lives, and often tired. Finding the time for anything else would have been almost impossible. Finding a man willing to spend that much time with someone else's children would have been even less likely.

None the less Hal started getting nervous. He wanted sex more. Sex had always been feast or famine and devoid of passion or affection, with him. He usually wanted it if he could interrupt something Kat was doing. He would often follow it with some remark intended to bring her down. Now he had to have it every morning. Kat likened this new behavior to a cat marking territory.

Sometimes Hal would suddenly switch to a softer voice when speaking to her. He usually used this voice when he wanted to manipulate someone. Kat thought it sounded like the gentle voice of the murderous computer in the movie, "2001, A Space Odyssey". Hal became angry when she referred to it as his "Hello Dave" voice.

Every morning Hal went off to work looking happier than usual, reveling in his newfound freedom. Every evening he came home angry. Kat was already used to his habit of bursting into the house, yelling at everyone, making pronouncements and then leaving. Life was always easier when he was on the road. Now he was like a yo yo. One minute he was ecstatic. The next minute he was furious that Kat might also have freedom ... and he wasn't going anywhere!

"The thought of you with another guy!" he lamented.

"Do you want to call the open marriage off?"

"No."

"Put it on hold?"

"No. Do what you want."

"You've had an open marriage anyway," said Kat. "Why do you lie when you know it's the lies that hurt our marriage?"

"Do you think I'm proud of it?" he replied glumly. "I do things because I feel guilty."

Kat continued,

"If it makes you feel guilty, why don't you just stop?"

"Can an alcoholic just stop drinking? Can a smoker just stop smoking?"

... another rare moment of honesty. Maybe this marriage was salvageable in some form after all.

The next day Hal would deny having said it, with his usual innocent air. His mood swings would intensify. He told Kat that he was having fantasies about killing people. He told her how he'd grown up believing that some day he would own a woman, adding that it was a revelation to learn otherwise from the women he hung out with at work. He said how angry it made him if she didn't do exactly what he wanted her to. He threatened welfare for her and the children if they parted.

By now none of this felt odd or frightening to Kat, and there was Lou ...

Chapter 10

The Plans

Lou was a good skier, unlike Kat who hadn't been on the slopes for over 20 years. But it didn't matter. She had to watch her three-year-old on the bunny hill anyway. It just felt good to be out in the fresh air.

Later they could go back home and maybe watch some children's movie. The children would long be asleep by the time Hal got home. That might calm Hal. He always wanted them in bed before he came home.

"Hey, Kat!"

Lou skated toward her on his skis. He looked much more attractive with a toque covering his bald head, even with the red nose.

"Why don't you and the kids come up to my mother's condo over the holidays? There are pool tables and pingpong tables, and the kids might enjoy the hot tub."

Kat decided to run it by Hal. Kat and Hal never spent the new year together and this could be a good way to get some needed time apart.

After stuffing the children with as many expensive, lodge French fries as they could hold, the troop headed home. To Kat's disappointment Lou did not stay for the videos.

The children had just fallen asleep when Hal returned.

"Over the new year, I'm taking the children to Lou's mother's condo," Kat blurted.

"OK," Hal shrugged.

She knew they still had to get through Christmas, but this would give them something to look forward to.

Christmas day would be as traumatic as always. Kat always held a special Christmas early so that the children could enjoy it. Then she and Hal would pack all the children into the car and drive two and a half hours to the grandparents houses. They would visit for several hours at the home of Kat's parents, and finish up by making the rounds of Hal's family.

At first, everyone in Hal's family would want to see the children, but the novelty always wore off quickly. With nothing to do there the children would get bored and cranky. It was up to Kat to keep a lid on them. The grandmother kept trying to feed Jon things he was allergic to when Kat wasn't looking. Hal's alcoholic father could be mean.

Throughout the visit Hal would spend most of this time laying down in one of the bedrooms while the grandfather sat, glassy-eyed on the couch. Kat was expected to slave with the women in the kitchen, and serve the men.

Every year at the end of this exhausting day they would drive home, with Hal picking at and yelling at Jon all the way.

It was the Christmas from hell, only this year when the ordeal of Christmas was over there would be something to

look forward to.

"It's in Floorton," Kat continued. You could come too if you want."

She knew that Hal was really neither invited nor interested. He never wanted to do anything with the children. With only a week to go he probably had his own plans, but she felt she had to ask.

Hal did not dignify her empty offer with a response.

The Break

1996

When Lou arrived on New Year's Eve, Hal had already left for somewhere or other. This trip was joyful and for Kat, made even more exciting by Lou's presence. Kat and Lou held hands as the children played games in Lou's spacious van.

"I get some extra cash every year. Could you use a couple thousand dollars?"

Kat couldn't believe her ears. It seemed to come out of nowhere.

"Do I look like I need money?"

"To get away from Hal. I've seen how he treats you."

It was starting to feel too intense.

"Lou, let's just have a good time. I want the kids to have a good time. It's only for a little while. Let's just enjoy it."

She turned the radio up. Now did not feel like the time to discuss money with one of Hal's get-rich-quick business partners.

Lou said little for the rest of the ride to Floorton but he continued to hold Kat's hand.

The rest of the day slipped by in a harmonious haze leaving everyone satisfied and sleepy. After putting the children to bed Kat was too tired to stay up for the New Year. Lou retired to read a book.

At precisely midnight, a harsh ring shattered the peace. It was Hal calling from Capitol City. Through sleepy ears Kat heard him say that the key was on the kitchen table and he was leaving.

She jolted to full wakefulness in time to hear Hal's voice tell her that he was not coming back. Giddy, she put down the phone and shared the news with Lou.

Then, unable to sleep, she lost herself in Lou's arms.

It all seemed so easy.

The Change

The next day saw three contented children and Kat into a quiet house. Kat thought it a bit excessive when Lou immediately changed the locks and secured the windows, but didn't question it. She still wasn't feeling quite grounded, but didn't waste any time before making changes.

The master bedroom became an office. All of Hal's things were carefully packed and left just inside the front door. The unfinished basement became an enormous play room. That left one bedroom for the children to share and one very small one that would be enough for Kat. Who was she kidding? They would all end up in her room anyway ... One room for Kat to call her own and one where they would probably all sleep. It didn't matter any more. They would work it out.

The phone rang. It was Hal.

"I saw Lou today. We thought he might live at the house to cover off my rent at a rooming house."

It was all happening so fast.

"Where is Lou now?"

"I don't know. He'll call."

Hal hung up.

Soon Hal would be telling the judge that there was a man in the house.

Lou didn't call. Instead, he showed up that night. Kat had just settled the children for the evening and was stealing a few quiet moments when a light knock at the door told her she wasn't alone.

From that moment Lou occupied the small room.

For the first week the routine of life with Lou was idyllic. Then Hal took to bursting into the house and threatening, driving by at any hour, and idling his car in the driveway.

Kat got a temporary, Ex-Parte court order to keep Hal at least 100 km from the house. Judge Hood, usually known for his harshness toward women, granted it. Lou delivered it to Hal. Lou also delivered all of Hal's belongings to him along with anything of value left in the house. Kat thought that giving up the good possessions might give Hal less to fight over. When the court order expired, Hal showed up to tell Kat that she had to let him back in or he'd lose his rights. Then he started sending large bouquets of flowers home with the children after visitation. He had never given her flowers before. The courts asked him to stop this behavior.

When Hal left, Jon started to relax. Within a week he had stopped fighting with his father even during phone calls. This bothered Hal a lot. In Hal's family of origin, that was how they related to one another. He had long since stopped

trying to get Kat to nag him, but Jon's hyper energy had always been easy to stir up. Though Jon always took the time to talk to Hal, Hal was starting to feel ignored.

Visitation was also a fiasco. The children were hyper and resistant. It was harder on Hal than on Kat ... and Hal found it hard to use the boys as tools to bully Kat. Once every two weeks and an evening a week was way more time than he was used to spending with his children. He would yell at them all weekend. He would call Kat so that she could hear the youngest cry at night. He would take them on tours of an old address, which one of the children had never seen, and tell them how happy everyone was there before mommy made him go away.

Between visitations, Hal would threaten Kat. He reminded her that he would see her and the children on Welfare. He threatened to send the children to India. He demanded informal, extra visitations, and used that time to sit in Kat's driveway. He said,

"... and we'll see what the courts say about Timmy!"

That the children didn't want to go with Hal worked in his favor. Kat was blamed in court for their reluctance.

Every visitation, Hal asked Kat for another list of possible outings for the children. The first couple of times, she wrote it out. He would say he lost it and ask for another. When Kat started photocopying the same one over and over, he stopped asking. Later on, Kat learned that sending a list of things to do on visitation would make her look controlling in the eyes of the courts.

Kat decided that with someone like Hal, a subtle master of manipulation and coercion, communications would have to be written down. That's when Hal stopped communicating

with her and told everyone that she wouldn't speak to him. Sometimes he even pretended to be afraid of her.

Once Jon tried to play the situation for his own advantage.

"If you won't give me a candy bar, I'll tell Dad that you changed the rooms around."

"I have nothing to hide and I don't care what you tell him."

"I know. He's the one with something to hide. He won't admit to all those things he showed me in the court documents," Jon retorted.

This was where Kat picked a social worker from the top of her lawyer's list. Clara was sold to her as someone who would help the children to deal with who their father was and go on visitation anyway.

Chapter 11

Clara

1997

Clara Blight was much younger than Kat. Though overweight, she was very attractive with long, blond hair, blue eyes and freckles on her nose. Clara hoped to build her reputation as a court therapist and mediator. She operated with a degree in social work, while pretentiously referring to her role in the court scenario as "Psychotherapy".

The children were clearly distressed and told Clara how Dad screamed at them all through their weekends with him. Clara, a very emotional person, listened sympathetically.

The first thing Clara taught the children was that they should say "no" to visitation. She told them how to handle the police if they came. She told them that their mother *had* to send them out.

"If the police come, you say, 'My mum says that I have to go, but I don't want to.'"

It calmed the children down and they never forgot the lesson. After that, the boys found it more of an inconve-

nience than anything else to see Clara. If they resisted she would tell them that if they wouldn't get out of the car they would have to go with their father. They got out.

When Clara started seeing Hal there was a definite shift. Kat could see that Clara was flattered by him and impressed by the show he put on with the children. The children stopped trusting Clara at all. To help them to cope with their social worker, Kat arranged for counseling with their less emotional family doctor, and assured them that this would not be used in court. It did help the children to relax.

Hal, meanwhile, was relentless. He complained about the children's homeschooling until the principal of their alternative school reminded Clara that she had not heard from Hal throughout the six years of home schooling that took place while he was living with them.

There were also misinterpretations to deal with. On Hal's first and only visit to Clara that involved all the children, he made a little squeak and a gesture, and these usually well behaved children suddenly started running frenetically around Clara's home and office. One even wrapped himself around Hal's leg to be dragged along in play. Kat thought it bizarre to see them so frenzied. Clara took it as a sign that they were desperate to see "their Hal". But Clara's support of Hal seemed to make it even harder to get the children out of the house for visitation.

Sometimes Kat, Lou, the children and three other regulars at Kat's little bungalow would sleep in the same room to make room for still more guests. Kat had seen this phenomenon in parts of Europe. It was inconvenient, but didn't happen often.

Hal had the children saying to Clara:

"When Lou sleeps with us..."

Kat was sure that it must sound kinky to Clara, but it also seemed absurd to correct it by adding even more people to the bedroom. Anyway, within a year all of the "lodgers" including Lou would be gone.

Kat learned from a neighbor that Hal had been sitting in his car down the street from her house every Tuesday and Thursday evening at 9:00 pm—for years. If someone approached his car he raised a newspaper over his face so that he wouldn't be recognized. This had taken place at a time when Kat was hoping Clara and Hal wouldn't know how isolated she was. Hal knew, but pretended that the opposite was true. The wrong person knew that Kat didn't really have an "adult life".

Three years later Hal had changed the number on his license plates three times.

Often Hal would arrive for visitation, pick a fight with Jon, and peel off in his car, leaving the children in the driveway. He would then tell people that Kat wouldn't let the children go. Here and there he would play the boys against each other and have them running into the house in tears to try to get Kat to solve some problem about visitation he created with them. When Kat had to leave early and a neighbor sent the boys out for visitation they locked themselves in their tree fort and refused to go. After moving to the country, they sometimes ran into the forest and lost Hal there.

Hal also had Clara agreeing that the boys needed corporal discipline to keep them in line. She gave Hal carte blanch, though Kat didn't think he would be stupid enough to personally hurt them physically. Anyway, to Hal his children

were only a means to an end.

Reflecting on times gone by, trying to make sense of things, Kat remembered the one time during the marriage that Hal had played leap frog with his children. One of Hal's friends was visiting for the first and only time. Hal had seen Kat and the boys play leap frog. Suddenly, he crouched and pointed to his back. The children immediately played exactly two rounds of leap frog with Hal—the only rounds they would ever play with him. Then Hal ended the show. His friend went home with an impression. Alone again with the children Hal barked at them to get away and laid down on the couch.

During the years after Hal left, the children forgot how rough he could be. For a while, their only early memories of Hal would be of his prone body on the couch.

Except for Tim, Clara didn't see the children more than a few times. David was given permission to avoid visitation for a time because it was upsetting him so much. Jon would attend for the bribes anyway, always returning with eczema on his lip.

Initially, Clara and Hal went on a few outings together with Tim. When Tim tried to pull rank to get out of visiting with Hal, Clara duly recorded it. People usually see what they are looking for and "Mum doesn't want me to go..." sounded pretty definite.

Though he only said it once, it spawned a scathing report.

Kat had heard Tim say that kind of thing to his friends many times.

"Mum says to play with this toy, not that one"

... as if Kat cared which toy Tim and his friends played with. Would she have protected her three-year-old from emo-

tionally abusive weekends with Hal, had it been possible? Of course. But she hadn't told Tim that.

Meanwhile, Hal's provable lies and the children's frequent, very real protestations were completely ignored in the face of what the courts expected to see. Before visitations, Kat encouraged Tim to be strong and reassured him that she would be there for him when he returned.

In later years, when even Tim accepted visitation as a boring but inevitable time he had to endure, Hal would interrupt Kat's day with a phone call to give himself a break.

"Tim needs you."

Tim would then get on the phone and say,

"Dad says he wants to go on the Internet so I should talk to you."

Sometimes Tim would claim illness and Hal would leave him behind. Sometimes Hal would just leave Tim behind because it tied Kat up to have a baby at home. On these visitation days Timmy would play happily with his friends, and Kat would quietly go about her business.

Kat couldn't blame Clara for being manipulated by a man who had manipulated her for 13 years. Hal's sad and sensitive face could melt an iceberg. Everyone had felt sorry for Hal at one time or other, including Kat. There were times when it seemed as if the world was babysitting Hal.

Tim developed allopetia as a result of having to go on visitation. When he started looking like 'Friar Timmy' Hal didn't want to show him around much and let him stay behind every time. Later on Tim would remember this simply as a mellow time.

At one point, Jon accused Kat of signing a paper saying that the boys had to go on visitation. Hal had shown it to

him during a recent outing.

Meanwhile, Kat's lawyer told her that if she changed social workers it would look like she was professional shopping. She would just have to stick it out.

For two years, Kat and Hal saw Clara once a week without the children. Clara and Hal continued to develop their friendship. Hal would wax eloquent about romantic-sounding places that the children then never saw. Clara would listen bright-eyed, enraptured. Anything Kat said was dismissed.

Clara spent an inordinate amount of time trying to get Kat to leave the Family Responsibility Office (FRO) who were monitoring Hal's child support payments.

One day when she was leaving Clara's home office, Kat turned to make sure the door wouldn't slam. Through the narrowing gap she watched Clara leap into Hal's arms.

Chapter 12

The Disappointment

Lou waited almost a year for his inheritance to come before paying any rent. Even then Kat had to force the issue. He had already filled Kat's house with people who "used to be rich", who also didn't pay their rent. At first Kat allowed it. She allowed it because it meant that there was always someone to watch the children. She allowed it because there were people to comment on Hal's obvious stalking. She felt protected by this crowd of moochers.

Lou seemed to return her affection during this time, too. Unlike Hal, Lou seemed to enjoy physical contact even when it didn't result in sex. Kat felt accepted and opened her heart. Then Lou's inheritance arrived.

"There are going to be some changes around here!" Lou pronounced on delivering the news. Then he stalked out.

This was a side of Lou that Kat hadn't seen, though she recognized the behavior. In the weeks that followed, Lou became the bully she thought she'd left behind. He criticized, shouted and tried to work Kat into circular arguments. He

would get upset and tell Kat that she was upset. He would quote her out of context, and keep harping on it. He would tell her that she should listen to him because he was psychic ...

Kat realized that there had been lots of clues that she'd overlooked: Clues like Lou's obvious competition with her children for her time ... clues like arriving home to find him sulking, with no explanation or possibility of discussion. Was she so used to men who had never grown up that she had overlooked these clues?

She had also noticed that he seemed to give away other people's possessions, including hers, as gifts. As a businessman, he used the money Kat had lent him (to go into business for himself, and maybe pay his rent) to buy items for resale. Then he sold the items for less than they had cost and kept the money for himself. He tried to bully Kat into working to support him.

"A beautiful woman is in love with me. Now I know what it's all about! You want my money!"

"Lou, I've supported you for almost a year! Just pay your rent."

"Here is some money. Now use it to pay down the mortgage."

"I'll use it to pay down the debts you've caused in my name. The interest on those is much larger than anything I'll save by paying down a mortgage."

Kat learned from Lou's family that the two thousand dollars Lou had offered her on the way to Floorton was money he usually bullied from his mother each year.

One day, Kat overheard Lou's daughter, who sometimes stayed at Kat's house, say:

"You'd better not hurt her! I like her. You'd better not hurt her!"

She was referring to Kat. Clearly Lou had been less than kind to some people before.

Though his mother's untimely death prevented Lou from taking the money that year, he stood to inherit $200,000.00. But his other siblings blamed Lou for the heart attack that killed their mother as she awaited his arrival on one of his bullying expiditions. They were also angry that he had broken into her cottage and that he had run up enormous phone bills at all of their houses. They subtracted all the money he had borrowed or stolen from his family from his share of the inheritance, leaving him with $100,000. Of that, he owed his ex wife $60,000. in arrears.

It wasn't easy to get Lou to move out. He had his eye on the equity in Kat's house.

Lou's children eventually helped Kat to get Lou out of Kat's house. He was the last of her moochers to leave:

"Well, I'm going now."

"Bye Lou."

"Well, I'm really going now."

"Bye Lou"

"... and we may never see each other again."

"Bye Lou."

"You should buy me an RV on your credit card. We could go somewhere."

"Bye Lou."

"You owe me, you know!"

"Bye Lou."

Lou turned out to be like Hal, only not as smart or subtle. Hal had tried to enlist Kat's family in his efforts to get back

into the house so that he wouldn't lose his rights. Lou called Kat's sister and told her that he'd paid for part of the house.

Kat found out that he had used the same tactic on his ex wife, who (unlike Kat) awaited her own inheritance.

For the next few years, Kat heard from Lou when he was between addresses: on Thanks Giving as he tried to get an invitation to dinner, and around Christmas time.

After three years he stopped calling altogether.

Lou had helped Kat to get away from Hal, and she was grateful for that.

But a year after her separation from Hal, she was really alone in this with three young children, an unrelenting Hal and his side kick - Clara.

The Grieving

Hal made good his promise of poverty, though the parting he had engineered had not worked out according to his original plan. He meant to force Kat into the work force or at least on to welfare so that he wouldn't have to support the children. He thought he'd primed her. Years before they parted Hal encouraged Kat to go on to welfare and pretend to be separated to increase his income. Instead, when he left he ended up paying child support and Kat insisted that it go through FRO. It was harder to play his financial sleight of hand if a third party was keeping records—harder, but not impossible. He just had to confuse the middleman.

Hal had always found it easy to manipulate Kat. Like Clara, she seemed to be ruled by emotion. It appeared to Hal that she sacrificed herself for the children to the point of

martyrdom. He was sure that on seeing the children suffer Kat would crumble.

What Hal really didn't expect was the deep pain that overcame him when Kat wouldn't let him come back. It wasn't that he respected her. He loved her like a favorite, old couch with sentimental value. For years there was no doubt in his mind that if he stalked and bullied her enough she would come back. When she didn't, Hal wanted blood. He would own her or destroy her.

By this time Kat wouldn't engage him in his lies, wouldn't fall apart at the sight of her children's tears, wouldn't take the blame for what he had done.

For nine years after parting, Hal stalked Kat, never asking for the children. Visitation had only ever really been a stalking opportunity for him. But if Hal was having trouble letting go of Kat she couldn't understand why.

Kat thought about one of the few times she and Hal had shared time with baby Jon. They were walking down a street in Burbcity, pushing six-month-old Jon in a carriage. It meant nothing to Hal, though the joy Kat felt from that one, simple memory would reverberate throughout her life.

Remembering helped Kat to realize the extent to which she owned her own feelings. The Hal who had contributed to her joy in that moment had never really existed. Lou hadn't exactly turned out to be a knight on a charger either. All of these intense feelings must have been her own projections.

Kat remembered Hal's trip to the mountains with two women and a guy from work. At the time, she was home with three small children, cracked ribs and a concussion, having fallen down stairs. (... a silly accident which wouldn't have happened had she not been sleep deprived!) She remembered

the phone call that Sunday night:

"Hal, if you can't be there for me when I need you, what makes you think that when the children are grown and I have more time I'll want to spend that time with you?"

Her weakness betrayed her with a sob.

"You cry when you confront," Hal replied coolly.

That was all.

Kat remembered Hal's parting words before work each morning as she handed him his lunch at the door:

"You look like a frumpy house wife."

Weren't "might-have-beens" supposed to be part of the grieving process?

Instead Kat felt as if a weight had been lifted.

There would be no nostalgia.

The Valley of the Cats

They seemed to materialize from out of nowhere. All Kat knew was that suddenly her friends seemed to have an awful lot of cats. Most of these women were much older than Kat, and devoted their lives to saving furry little animals. Sometimes they banded together to increase their resources in an effort to save more animals, but they really didn't seem to like one-another.

This was the generation before Kat's, when women had fewer options. Even so, most of these women had chosen not to remarry, or as Ellen (an impromptu leader in the group) put it,

"Well, I could have a pot-bellied old man telling me what to do, but I'd rather have a cat."

Most of these women lived by their wits, asking society for little. Some of them had houses because a relative had helped them out before passing on. Some gambled in a futile attempt to change lives that no longer seemed to fit society's norms. There were even a few who were still married, with husbands to limit the number of strays that could be brought home.

When Kat's stray men left it seemed that stray cats swooped in to fill the void. The kids loved it, so she let it happen.

Chapter 13

Games

1998

Kat stole a few moments to lie on the hot, bare boards of her back deck, sampling the exquisite scent of milkweed flowers that bloomed around her new, country property. Milkweeds were one of many culinary treasures to offer up their secrets since she and the boys had left the city, though you could only eat the tiny, new tips.

A pot of lambs quarters soup simmered on the stove. Cooked lambs quarters taste like spinach. Many common garden weeds had proven to be healthy, less expensive alternatives to their over cultivated cousins in the super market. Weeds such as purslane and dandelion, purposely gardened in Europe but generally ignored in Canada, would grow in the poor soil on Kat's new property. They were all that would grow, and they were enough.

It took ingenuity to live this way. A picture painted over cracked glass in the kitchen window held the pane together. Floors smoothed with mismatched tiles discarded from tile

outlets cut a crazy path through most rooms. Some people paid Kat to lay similar mosaics in their houses, but she knew it would take the right buyer should she be forced to sell her own house.

If Kat's pioneer lifestyle left little time and no money for recreation, at least the country environment was regenerating. When Highway 480 flooded with SUVs en-route to some place with more potential for equanimity than Capitol City, Kat and the boys were already there. Frenzied motor boats tore through pristine, northern lakes while Kat and the boys learned the secrets of the peaceful countryside outside their door—secrets that would help them to survive.

Many single mothers in this area juggled several, low paid jobs. This worked well for employers who did not want to have to pay benefits. It seemed to Kat that these women spent their days and evenings making someone else rich through long hours of labour, unprotected by the laws written for full time employees.

In many cases, two or three part time jobs resulted in work weeks longer than the government-legislated 60 hours. Two hectic months of juggling jobs might pay someone else for an hour of work needed to fix these women's homes or cars. As part time employees they were not even eligible for overtime pay.

Society accepted this. On top of that, a blame-the-victim mentality often masqueraded under the guise of social justice or religion. Single mothers were not respected. No one used the term "slave" anymore, though slavery bore a strong resemblance to that lifestyle.

Most of these single mothers eventually ended up in subsidized housing, their children latch-key kids. Worse, their

movements were predictable by ex husbands or boyfriends as they struggled to meet the demands of their grueling routine.

Kat found herself in a similar situation, though she looked privileged by comparison on paper. All of her short-lived wife support and some of the child support was in the end used up to pay lawyers. Hal would do only what he had to do for the boys, and then only if someone else was looking. The Family Responsibility Office (FRO) was slow to act, so he ignored them.

In any case, Kat learned early on that the less contact she had with Hal, the better. Hal could complicate a peanut butter sandwich. He twisted everything she said or did. He made things up if he thought he could get away with it. He seemed determined to ruin her. Through it all, Cassandra's words kept coming back:

"You have to come to a place where it really doesn't matter what he does."

... easier said than done, when you have children.

Striking a balance between working and keeping a stable family environment was tricky. Kat always had to assess whether it was more cost effective for her to do repairs, live with the breakage or pay someone more than she made to do the work. She balanced odd jobs that, because of their lack of security, paid well in comparison to the more predictable, minimum-wage jobs accepted by most in the area. She used resources creatively, buying nothing that wasn't essential. As long as she was considered by the government to be self-employed, Kat could also claim expenses against some of the sporadic contract jobs she juggled.

Since she wasn't locked into traditional jobs, it was harder for Hal to predict her movements or medal in her life.

Keeping an erratic schedule was not unusual in the world of single mothers. While doing census one year, Kat met another woman hiding out in the country from a stalking ex husband. This woman and her new partner had felt the need to house attack dogs. She took a different rout home from work every day, and made sure that either she or her partner were with the children at all times.

Like many non-custodial parents, Hal played the self-employment game too, but in order to get out of child support. As the non-custodial parent he also had more freedom and made fewer sacrifices. The only thing he sometimes took seriously was the money FRO kept track of, which didn't include his income that never entered Canada. Even that responsibility felt like too much for him.

He complained in court about the cost of his occasional visitations, or if convenient, lied about paying for extra curricular activities. He told the boys that he would spend up to $100, including gas to pick them up for each visitation, and made them stick to that.

The Clara Connection

Despite Clara's contributions life became relatively sane once the issues of money and access were separated. Hal tried to make a problem of it when Kat moved further north to save money. Hal always made a problem of anything Kat initiated, but he had no power this time. Kat's small house was within court-acceptable range of the matrimonial home. Hal had already moved well outside that range, acceptable for the non-custodial parent.

At last, Hal grew tired of paying Clara. He softened

the innuendos on which all sessions were based to reflect some success on Clara's part. After two years of games and platitudes Clara dismissed Hal and Kat, patting herself on the back for having "created harmony between the two". Two years of relative peace followed as Hal resorted to methods of harassment outside the courts that were even easier for Kat to ignore.

Then Clara called again.

"Hal has called me with a list of things that are wrong with you and asked me to mediate. I told him that I only work for the children. How are the children doing?"

"They are doing very well," Kat responded.

"Good," said Clara. "Then we are done."

Soon after, Kat began to receive firm letters from Sis Bumb demanding an audience in the presence of Clara, with Hal and her. This time he was dragging the children into it though visitation had been going better than ever. Things were going *too* well for Hal.

Kat couldn't afford a lawyer, but interviewed one of the best in the city anyway.

His parting words about Clara shouldn't have puzzled Kat:

"I've heard things about her. It's too bad you had to get mixed up with her."

If Clara was known to have made some mistakes, why was she afforded such power by the courts?

Clara was bright. She had a good heart. Obviously, she had her own father issues. Most of all she was young and lacked the experience to see through someone like Hal. By allowing the children to feel their own power, at first she had even seemed like a visionary.

Whatever her shortcomings Clara seemed to recognize at first that the system didn't take into consideration a young child's need to have a voice. Clara would not have understood that the way she briefly gave the children a voice and then took it away along with Kat's had left them unprotected. In the face of Hal's masterful manipulation and coercion, Kat imagined Clara to be something of an innocent victim.

Clara never re-entered Kat's life, though Hal continued to raise her specter. The court's perception was that if she hadn't been able to sort things out by then, she might not be the person for the job. Hal would elude to her having diagnosed Kat with some made-up Freudian mumbo-jumbo. (Years later he would make a point of mentioning that he included this in his will ... somehow, for some reason.)

Meanwhile, Hal got himself laid off from his job just in time for the scheduled update of child support in their court ordered agreement. Two black-suited bouncers showed up on either side of him at the office, one day, and walked him out.

Triumphantly, Hal relayed the news to Kat.

"I got careless on the Internet and they didn't waste any time."

Hard Years

Hal slid seamlessly into a self-employment opportunity he'd been planning with his lap-dancing partner-in-crime since before the marriage broke up. It had to do with taking on contracts that paid in one hour what Kat made in two days, taking them infrequently, making a lot of money all at once

and then having lots of time to travel. Kat knew all about it because he had told her years before that it would be his retirement plan.

Hal decided on the amount he would pay for Child support. It was exactly $100 less per month than his former, traceable salary would have demanded. He and his lawyer coerced Kat's rookie (and therefore cheap) lawyer into accepting a monthly payment which would keep the children at welfare level. Kat agreed, believing it to be a good, baseline amount to work from—assuming he actually paid it.

Life became very hard without dental plans and the consistency of FRO's garnishment. Hal deposited the child support infrequently, if he felt like it. He was well in arrears. FRO finally slapped his hand. He was especially angry at Kat for that.

Initially Hal's support was based on the old system where the payee was required to pay taxes. He claimed substantial returns every year. Hal omitted that detail when boasting to people about how much he was paying in child support. He also omitted the fact that his payments were based on a salary of $80,000 per year while he was making $110,000 per year. On top of that, Hal had refused to release Kat from a $20,000 debt, incurred through his get-rich-quick schemes during the marriage, until it was completely paid off. This meant that food for Kat and the boys was going on credit cards while she paid her lawyer to deal with Hal's court harassment. In the end, all of Kat's support (while it lasted) went to her lawyer, and a good chunk of child support went to pay the compounding, double-digit interest.

Kat's first lawyer, Jim Sealer, was tough and had a reputation for drawing out court matters and then abandon-

ing his clients when they ran out of money. Even so, Hal had frustrated him with his stubbornness and inconsistency. Kat's lack of gaming savvy and dwindling finances had to result in some kind of conclusion soon.

Festiville lawyers had a reputation for deciding outcomes before the trial. It was easier on everyone if the applicant and respondent just played the game. Despite Jim's prompting, Kat would not play games in court. She knew that her discomfort with deception of any kind showed in her face. Anyway, she was not the reason why access wasn't working out.

It soon became evident that things hadn't changed much since Chaucer wrote "The Pardoner's Tale".
[1]

In the end, the winner in court is the best actor and the one who can survive longest, financially. Hal played the victim and the "repentant absentee father" very well. Jim Sealer knew that Hal would drag things out until he bankrupted Kat, so he ended the game on a note the courts could accept, to ensure that he would be paid.

Eight years after Hal left, Kat was finally able to secure the divorce she had paid for when it all began. In the process she discovered that her latest (rookie) lawyer was taking advice from Hal's lawyer.

"Lawyers in Festiville stick together and help one another," her young lawyer naively stated.

Kat contacted the Law Society of Upper Canada for clarification but would not support an investigation that might ruin this dedicated, young lawyer's career. Because her new

[1] The Pardoner's Tale," The Canterbery Tales", Geoffery Chaucer, 1340? - 1400,

lawyer had confided a wish to help reform the legal system, Kat pulled her punch. In the end, Sis Bumb got off with a slap on the wrist. The law society was used to women like Kat who wouldn't or didn't know how to play the game.

Now Sis Bumb, who had already allowed herself to become emotionally involved with Hal's plight, *really* wanted blood.

Finally, FRO made a mistake and misread a paragraph which would have prevented Kat and the children from going through a month without child support. Hal put the money in at the end of the following month, effectively letting the children go through two months without child support. He would continue to put the child support in at the end of the month, when he put it in, for years to come. Kat borrowed $2000 from their mutual friend, Laila, to get by.

For his part, Hal spent exactly what he had to on the children, and no more, while claiming in court to pay for their extra curricular activities, clothing and extra food.

Thus began the years when Hal traveled the world while Kat and the children lived creatively to stay off welfare.

Kat and the children bundled up in the winter when they couldn't scrounge enough wood to keep the house warm. She continued to squeak by with the help of odd jobs, barter and the sale of her artwork.

Hal, as relentless as ever with his harassment, waited and watched as Kat's house increasingly showed signs of poverty and degeneration. He used his financial advantage to try to set her up in no-win situations.

"If you drive to my house in Mississauga and forge my signature on a cheque to FRO, you'll get it sooner. Zadeya will be there with my cheque book and a pen, waiting for

you."

Zadeya Prokod was one of Hal's business partners, and in some areas a well known con man.

"Hal, we'll wait for FRO," Kat replied.

A week later, Zadeya called.

"Hi! I'm Hal's friend, Zadeya Prokod. The next time Hal takes the children, we'll go out! How about a candle-lit dinner? Would you like to see the inside of a sex club?"

"Zadeya, don't call me again," Kat replied icily.

"Hi! It's Zadeya. You know, Hal will never marry again. He's just too much in love with you."

"I asked you not to call. Respect that."

"Hi! Zadeya again. I was in the car when Hal picked up the children. Did you see me?"

"No. Zadeya don't call again or I'll call the police."

Ten years after his departure Hal still conducted visitation by leaving the boys at various locations while he went about his own business. The boys would walk around a mall together or visit one of their friends until Hal returned to pick them up at the end of the day. Then he would drop them off at home. Except that Timmy sometimes had trouble keeping up with his older brothers in the malls or playgrounds, the children enjoyed these independent outings.

In the early days, when Kat had dropped the children off at a mall to meet Hal, she watched from her car as the heavy mall door closed before her three-year-old could make it through. She watched him struggle to get it open as his father and brothers reached the top of the escalator. They never even noticed that he was missing. Timmy was used to having to run to keep up during visitation. As Tim grew, visitation became less daunting for him. Kat was less con-

cerned.

Hal made it clear that taking the boys out was his way of holding on to some rights. It was also a good time to probe the children for information about Kat.

What Kat found most depressing was that her plight wasn't unique. Every time she went into the court house she seemed to be standing behind some woman who was afraid of being raped by an ex husband, or afraid that some atrocity would be committed against her children by their father. Relatively speaking, Hal might look good to some.

Anyway, whatever Hal did to Kat or the boys, at least they didn't have to live with him anymore. On some level Kat felt better than she'd felt in years.

Pulling it Together

"Dave, would you take this out to the coon-feeding pit, please?"

"Coon-feeding-pit" started out as a joke, but no one called it a compost pit anymore.

Welcome to life in the country.

Three kids, 13 cats, a crazy house full of art and a lot of homemade technology helped to balance lives without money. The cat food and litter was free, as long as Kat cared for all 13 cats. The kids had all the free pets they wanted, as long as it was a cat.

Kat turned her new home into a playground for herself and her family. The house was painted in contrasting, soft pastels. In winter there was always a splash of bright yellow somewhere to lift the spirits and remind them of summer. Every Thursday night Kat and the boys watched some goofy comedy together. If there was a code of conduct, it had to

be about creative freedom for all. Kat's emotional survival plan also sometimes included a noticeable lack of urgency with respect to household chores.

Friends donated clothes for Kat and the children. Since the boys were not in a regular school learning to be consumers, they did not care if they wore the latest fashions, or fashions altered by Kat to look more recent.

Specific needs could be improvised. Kat's cheap shoes could be turned into prostheses by building up the insole of a shoe with mounting tape and sticking odor-eaters over the altered foot bed. Kat cut everyone's hair herself. Living lean might keep them out of debt once almost $30,000. in court and interest debts had been rolled into the mortgage.

To protect the children in the event of her untimely death Kat wrote a will naming people who would hold her limited estate in trust for them. In it she left all the stray cats she'd been caring for on her country property to Hal, reasoning that if she died they would be a comfort to the boys.

Social perks for Kat were harder to arrange. An exhausted single mother over 50 with three children and a stalker for an ex husband did not see herself as an attractive package for lovers or friends. Men bent on avenging their ex wives seemed to abound. She'd had her children late in life. Kat had no money, limited energy, and little time. She didn't trust her own ability to attract a decent man. Most of the time she was too busy to notice loneliness anyway. While she missed expressing her sexuality at first, there were more important things to do than kiss frogs.

The boys continued to develop in their own ways. Jon's obsession with computers resulted in a network of wires snaked along the walls throughout the house. David resumed his

exploration of art and taught himself languages, and Tim's Popsicle-stick trebuchets littered the living room. Poverty hadn't dampened their spirits.

None the less, despite juggling jobs and keeping a tight belt, eight years after Hal left Kat was still unable to pay back the money Laila had lent her when Hal let the children go for months without child support. While Kat took a perverse pleasure in not contributing to the economy as a consumer, she wanted to be fair to her friend.

Representatives from FRO told Kat she would have to go back to court to have a paragraph clarified. It should have been simple, since Sis Bumb wrote the paragraph in the first place.

Chapter 14

Full Circle

2000

Every day, Kat made the 45 km trek to the court house. As a home owner she was entitled to no more than 15 minutes of free consultation with a lawyer each day. Had she sold the house, had fun with the equity and moved into subsidized housing she would have been eligible for free duty council. In that way her success in staying off welfare had backfired.

Kat made sure to mention Hal's travel in her court documents, because so far the file didn't seem to reflect his dishonesty at all. It wouldn't be the first time that Hal had been caught in a lie. It just didn't seem to matter that he lied, or be recorded.

Two years before, Hal had held up a settlement conference refusing to sign anything designed to ensure that neither party could go after the other for money. Kat also noticed other indications that Hal planned to construct a scenario which would allow him continued access to her assets. He was a long-term thinker and planner. He always had back-

up plans, and having to pay child support felt too much like losing.

Alas, Kat's re-entry into the system would snowball. Hal was waiting to pounce with his claim that she was a bad mother. His lawyer was willing to tell lies (that she knew were lies) in front of a judge, and Kat was under the microscope again.

Kat smiled to think of what a shock it would be to Hal if he actually won this new dispute over custody. Jon would litter Hal's house with every box, book and trinket he'd saved from the time he was born. David cared about his appearance and sometimes wanted (expensive) new clothes. Timmy was just going into puberty. The boys would at least need to bring all of their stray cats with them.

But both Kat and Hal knew it was only a game. Hal was throwing sand in the eyes of the authorities so that they wouldn't look for his hidden income. Had Kat left the children to him, Hal would have left them somewhere to fend for themselves anyway. Any problems they subsequently developed would be blamed on Kat and they would have ended up with her in the end—without child support, and probably without help with their post secondary education. Hal was too good at sewing confusion. Kat would not do that to the boys.

Over a year later, access was granted subject to the wishes of the children. In other words, nothing changed. This time Hal cost Kat over $8000 in Legal Aid liens on her house, with interest. In other words, the boys would not inherit. In other words, someday the government would have a wrecked up old house to fix up and sell.

Hal lost the custody case but confused the issues long

enough to give him time to relocate his money. He'd thrown the hounds off his trail. Hal even confused Kat's lawyer as he tried to retrieve costs.

More than ten years after Hal and Kat parted, an afternoon court appearance was cut short. Kat and Hal were invited into the court room to receive an apology from the judge for having to leave before things could be completed. Stunned by the suddenness of the request and confused by a kind of court-phobia she was developing, Kat rushed in and bowed stiffly, awkwardly, before the gracious-seeming woman. Judge Santon reassured them that she would be their judge for the next session. Kat noticed that Judge Santon made eye contact with Hal more often than her. She heard Hal's slick voice thanking the judge.

Kat recognized this judge. She was the same woman who had been sitting in the court room observing when Clara's accusations began the whole, Kafkaesque ordeal. By now Kat had spoken to a number of other women dealing with the court system. Santon had a reputation for siding with the men.

Not with a bang...

2006

It had been almost 11 years since Kat and Hal parted. Hal and Kat were still wasting time in endless, expensive settlement conferences engineered by Hal. Meanwhile, Hal had his friends convinced that Kat was always taking him to court for more money. This wasn't hard since Hal only ever maintained contact with his admirers and acquaintances, and none of them knew Kat. Sis Bumb even wrote in a

court briefing that Kat was asking for more money. Kat knew how futile and silly such a request would have been.

Hal couldn't understand why he hadn't toppled Kat yet, but he knew he must be close. He seemed determined to maintain some control of Kat's life, or at least to ruin her before running off ... or maybe he just didn't know how to stop. Kat had been his wife. He would always consider her to be his possession. She wasn't even a special obsession. Hal had obsessions all the time.

Meanwhile, Hal had to put a lot of energy into holding in place the reality he had created. His short-term memory deteriorated as he allocated mental resources to convincing himself that he was continually wronged by Kat. As always, he was selective in what he remembered, and how. Though years of sales training and study of human interaction had paid off in the courts, so far he had been unable to coerce Kat into playing his game. Even this seemed to work in his favor in the courts. For years he felt—and acted—quite smug.

Physically, Kat still looked pretty good for her age, though clearly not young. These days she kept her salt and pepper hair cut into a no-maintenance style that made the curls look intentional. Thin and elegant, she did look younger than her 56 years, but it felt as if her youthful energy had been used up. Constant, downward pressure, a backdrop of court headaches, and Hal's well-executed lies, had been features of her life for such a long time that they felt normal.

Hal was like a stone in Kat's shoe. He could be ignored sometimes, but would never go away. He used the courts to harass. Visitation was erratic and last-minute. He made sure that Kat paid for all of the boys' needs and then took credit

for it himself. He withheld child support where possible. Sometimes he contented himself with small gestures such as showing up unannounced on Kat's birthday to try to disrupt her plans.

While the challenges of poverty and Hal's attempts to unbalance her had not broken her spirit, Kat was feeling overwhelmed. Despite his recent remarriage, Hal was relentless.

With yet another court date looming, Hal lost the tenants whom he'd neglected to tell the courts about in the first place. He made it clear that his wife wasn't working. He continued to travel the world.

The children were getting older and doing well despite financial restrictions. They were nice boys. Jon was nearly 21, and qualified for student loans to attend university. Sensitive David would soon be 17. He was talented and quite delightful, if sometimes lacking in self esteem and perseverance. Bright and sociable, Tim was just embarking upon his teens and relied heavily on Jon and David for male role models. Kat was grateful that the boys didn't hate Hal, despite some of the things he'd put them through. She had experienced hatred once or twice on the way home from a court harassment session, and didn't want anyone to have to feel that way. She was also grateful that through his own actions Hal had shown the boys that he couldn't be trusted. The boys needed to understand that and let Hal own it. They were all resilient, self directed and there for each other.

Hal continued to visit his cult for a while, and made a point of mentioning his involvement there to Kat. Already he had been featured in the Church newsletter, in an article which subtly condemned Kat for taking him from the Church

of the Only One Way and then abandoning him. He was poised and ready to play the all-knowing ... whatever. A battery of "enlightened", important-within-the-group, guru types waited in the wings, ready to pretend Hal's importance along with him. Many of them also held respected positions in society.

At first, Hal even tried to pay Kat to attend some Church gatherings.

But Kat knew that connections shared with Hal turned into traps. Even as Hal stepped up his campaign to encircle her, Kat refused contact.

Life was in limbo. By now it felt as if it always had been and always would be.

Then it came in the mail. A letter forwarded from her latest lawyer showed Kat that things had been happening even though she wasn't informed. Like most letters coming from Hal's camp it didn't make much sense. It seemed to misinterpret Judge Santon's request for proof that Jon was full time at university, which had already been provided.

This time Kat's own lawyer had neglected to tell her what she needed to do. No one had informed her of a pending settlement conference, now only two weeks away.

System Failure

It was a record cold day for October. A fire crackled hot in the stove. Kat might already have scrounged enough scrap wood to last into the winter. As soon as the weather warmed up again she would have to cut more wood for the next cold spell.

The wind whistled in the eaves and a large, black sheet crawled by the basement window in front of her work station. The roofing paper, placed as temporary protection for the garage, had blown off. She knew she would have to finish the job before the garage started to leak.

Kat turned on the news.

"A woman is in jail tonight on a first degree murder charge. Police are awaiting autopsy reports on her two children, aged ..."

Kat had already heard. She knew someone who knew the mother. She knew that the mother and two children had been thrown out on the street when the husband/father found a younger woman.

"... The grief-stricken father is in shock."

The mother had gone to the local shelter and then to an apartment building for the underprivileged.

"... These seemed like happy children. Their grandparents were looking forward to having them for the weekend ..."

The children's father used to beat his wife and family.

"... The couple was scheduled to appear in court the next day on custody issues."

This woman had no money and nowhere to go. She was sure she would lose custody.

"... Police were called to the apartment after the mother dialed 911 ..."

It was supposed to be a murder suicide. She changed her mind—too late ...

What made that young mother believe that death would be better for her children than life in the hands of their father's family? And now, a woman driven by desperation

to do the unthinkable, grieved alone in jail, wishing she had carried through with her own death. While prison officials had her on suicide watch, the perpetrator roamed among us feigning grief.

This father wasn't a white collar sociopath like Hal. This father was up for assault charges. But the courts failed his wife and children all the same.

It seemed that this mother's claim to decency was that she dressed the children like princesses. Kat remembered the sting of Clara's words.

"Your boys need to dress better when going out."

Their second hand clothes often came with stains already on them. Hal only lied about giving more assistance than the money collected by FRO, and to this day he harped on every wrinkle in the boys' clothes. If Kat endured constant criticism for the one thing Clara and Hal could find wrong with the boys, what must it have been like for a woman who's family was interacting with the Children's Aid Society?

The province's court system, with its propensity for treating children like possessions, its indifferent (and even vicious) lawyers, and its archaic laws, was partly responsible for the deaths of two children, and living death for their mother.

Once again, Kat felt fortunate by comparison.

Chapter 15

Hope and Hardship

She gave up a rare day of supply teaching for that wasted hour. As with the earlier ambush by Hal's social worker friend, Hal didn't even have to show. Kat never saw the judge that day either, though she heard that it wasn't Judge Santon. She sat in the hall exhausted from a night of no sleep while the two lawyers decided everyone's fate. Too soon, her lawyer emerged.

"The judge recommends that you both cut all your losses and start with the present ruling."

(Hadn't Kat done that many times?)

"Legal Aid won't keep paying for this"

Hal's lawyer was the head of legal aid for the area. Kat's legal aid had been organized through Capitol City because of this. What had Hal's lawyer orchestrated?

"You will each pay your own court costs. Also, since we can't prove that he made more money in the past you are in danger of losing child support retroactively. (It was Hal's decision to pay what he paid, if sporadically.) The

judge believes that you should start fresh at this point. Jon can have two more years of child support whether or not he finishes university. Child support will be reduced by $1000 per month to reflect Hal's present salary."

Now Kat would not be able to pay Laila back. Now Legal Aid would be stalking her for costs that Hal had caused her to incur in court, while throwing the hounds off his own trail.

"You had lots of time to get that information from Jon's university to the courts. That also didn't look good for you."

Her lawyer's office was responsible for the delay and he knew it. She started to protest only to be stopped with a firm stare and the statement repeated.

Then his voice softened. This time he met her eye.

"Get that proof of full time university status to me as soon as possible, OK?"

So, David couldn't take dance lessons, and Tim wouldn't have lessons on the old piano a friend had dropped off. Jon had two years to be self supporting or everything would fall apart.

It was everything Hal wanted. He knew what Kat had lost. He knew that he had sent her a clear message not to interfere later on when he flaunted his money. His comment about a business man he had stalked while still married to Kat came to mind:

"At least he lost too."

Could it be that at last Hal wanted to get away as much as Kat wanted to lose him?

Alas, no.

A form arrived in the mail with instructions for Kat to sign away Jon's support ... this month. Kat reminded her lawyer that they were supposed to have one more year.

Hal's lawyer demanded, and got, a three-day trial to try to get him out of child support, but it was really more like a threat. Hal didn't gamble. Kat knew that Hal didn't gamble. He had someone's ear.

That child support would end soon was inevitable. Dave turned 18 in October and would be starting university. Jon was already 21. Hal had gotten away with missing a month of child support payments and cost Kat a lot of money already. Now he was trying to get a retroactive reduction in child support for the years that he was traveling and hiding money in other countries, and for the time that Jon was in university.

And even though he started it, Hal told the boys that Kat was taking him to court again.

Hope

2007

It happened on a cold, winter day. Kat had scrounged enough wood to warm the family for part of this (so-far) mild winter. Hal was still making expensive noises in the courts about getting out of child support, and trying to get child support back from Kat retroactively.

Recently, he had suggested to the boys that they move to Asia with him to make money, without Kat of course. This would get him away from the Family Responsibility Office, but more than that it would complete his revenge.

Now that the boys were older and more independent ... lower maintenance ... maybe he saw them as possessions he could take from her without the burden of responsibility.

Hal told the boys that many countries in Asia don't have tax treaties with Canada. Though he had hated his recent trip to Japan, the tax shelter offered by some places in Asia was a tempting bonus.

With a new wife, lots of money, Kat's low credibility in the courts, and his cult member friends believing that Kat had wronged him, Hal was sure he could pull it off. The boys were reaching an age where the Canadian government considered them to be responsible for themselves. If he disrupted their university education he wouldn't have to pay for it. David wanted to travel ...

After years of resenting the fact that he sometimes paid child support, maybe he could satisfy himself with having everything and leaving Kat all alone and sad. At least he would shake her out of her home—maybe even into some form of "slavery". He would make her feel what it felt like to be replaced!

If that didn't work, maybe the boys would move to Suncity and live in his apartment building. Perhaps the allure of independence would shake them out of school long enough for him not to be responsible for their university education. He could charge them a reasonable rent for the first year and then convince them that he would lose the building without their financial help. If Kat ever got going, he knew she would pay for their education anyway. Maybe she would pay ANYTHING to get them back! Surely it was her lawyers that kept her going through all that. She always hid behind lawyers. Now she would be completely vulnerable. Now he would take the only possessions she cared about—all she had left—her children.

Hal always had back-up plans. Manipulating David wasn't

so hard. He was trusting. Maybe Hal could do a divide-and-conquer thing after all. Maybe all he had to do was draw David out among the people who felt sorry for him. David wanted to travel. It wouldn't be too hard. David looked for affirmation and Hal could play the approving father for a little while. Or maybe he would refuse to pay for Dave's education and cut him off child support. Then he would offer him travel instead. Kids are into short-term gain! Weren't the boys old enough to be cast adrift if they became a nuisance?

He would break up the contented family that had formed in his absence.

Hal always had plans, and back-up plans ...

Kat also worried less about the boys as they got older. Her goal had been to spawn emotionally competent men. That included self-sufficiency. With one emerging from his tumultuous teens and one already out of his teens, they were well on their way. Timmy was a wild card, but he had great older brothers for role models! The problem, if Hal took over, might be keeping the boys together until Timmy was at least 18. The other problem was that Tim had anxiety problems. This would be predictable around the age of 18 for children who had experienced abuse around the age of three. That was his age when Hal was traumatizing him on visitation.

Meanwhile, Hal's self-publishing kept showing up on the Internet. It was proof that he really was traveling while his children lived in poverty, but no one cared. Through Hal's well-practiced, hypnotic veneer, no one wanted to notice his pesky lies or have to deal with them. He mirrored people's body language and pretended to be exactly what

they wanted to see. With women, that was often the protective father they never had.

... another "Hal no-win" situation?

In the midst of this an old friend bounced through to Kat on the Internet from Vietnam.

When Kat had known Denny-George, he was a two-spirited Aboriginal man working in the kitchen of a local hospice. He'd been a good friend so she'd kept track of him after he left to explore the world. Now his voice from half a world away offered her an opportunity that seemed too good to be true.

"Come and teach English, and practice your journalism skills in Vietnam. Jon's computer skills will be in great demand too. David can tutor English after school, and Tim can go to school for free if you are one of the teachers."

Kat felt her wrist-support tremble through thick layers of clothing as the wind drove snow sideways past her window. Even with the hardship and winter cold they loved their peaceful home. Eleven years had passed since Hal's departure. Somehow they had hung on despite his attempts to topple Kat, but at this point what would they be giving up?

Denny had answers for everything.

"I'm never leaving this place. I love the people. I love the climate."

Kat would think about it. She would discuss it with the boys. She would not make a move without taking into consideration all of their needs. After all, what did their little provincial village offer? ... a bad education system ... a future as a drudge worker ... Hal.

Hal would show up if he wanted to, anywhere in the

world. In fact, he immediately contacted the boys to tell then about his business contacts in Vietnam. Perhaps he had hacked her email?

He might call her back to court, causing her to spend anything she could make—if she would come. Was that worse than welfare in the province? Was it worse than a future for the boys at the hand of a sociopath?

Definitely, she would have to think this through.

A Day in the Life

Kat awoke with the buzzing of a defective stereo speaker boring into her consciousness. She adjusted the two winter coats, Goodwill specials, that doubled as extra comforters, and pulled her feet up under them. Despite a bursting bladder she was in no hurry to encounter icy, tile floors. Then the phone rang.

Most winter mornings started this way, with Kat dashing to pick up the phone before the answering machine kicked in, holding her thumb over the mouthpiece to dampen the sound of a flushing toilet and scrambling downstairs to start a fire in the old wood stove.

"It's Janice from Lakeside Secondary School. Feel like teaching today?"

This time it was work. More often the wake-up call was Kat's friend, Connie, wanting to relate some adventure that must have taken place since they spoke the night before. That would come next while Kat scrambled to make breakfast for the kids and get ready for the slippery drive into town.

"Who left their pancakes on the counter? Noodles is eating them!"

Their brown tabby licked and batted a pancake he'd dragged to the floor.

Connie and Kat laughingly commented on the clicks they had been hearing on Kat's phone ever since Hal found work at the local telephone company. A police officer who was a friend of Connie had told her that clicks on the phone definitely meant she was being monitored. They poked fun at Hal in case he could hear them.

Then Kat was off. This would be one of those 12-hour days ... teaching followed by tutoring followed by finishing up the last of a delivery job begun the day before. Always the work came at once.

Kat returned home to the stench of cat pee in the entryway. The first order of the evening was to grab the vinegar and clean that up! She wouldn't throw the cats outside in a frozen, Canadian winter, but she could hardly wait for spring!

The counter was covered with dishes and bits of food. After the kids proudly shared their culinary creation, Kat cleaned up.

There were 12 emails waiting to be answered. The fire in the stove had gone out. Connie called for no apparent reason, and then it was time for Kat to curl up beneath her two coats, turn on Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" and wait for sleep to overtake her.

Call it "a day in the life of a single mum". Kat vaguely remembered that life didn't have to be like this, but the boys didn't seem to mind their hillbilly existence. Kat jokingly reasoned that it served to weed out the social-climbers. She

could stand the hardship because she never saw it as something that would last.

Many of the other supply teachers were also slightly out of the main stream, if a main-stream even existed anymore. It was "jobs for those of (advanced) job age". It was where the people with some education who didn't get to retire went. While the deficit of teachers lasted, it could be a refuge for a marginalized single mother. Many supply teachers seemed to be fitting in some life's passion on the side. Single mothers like Kat just worked.

But this might change forever if Kat could muster the courage to move far away.

Chapter 16

Summer, 2007

A slate-green, Porsche rocked and Bumped into Kat's pitted driveway. Hal emerged and mock-examined possible damage to its wheels before turning his smirk toward the house. Except for a couple of lame harassment letters from Hal's lawyer—something about retroactive payment—Kat hadn't thought of him lately.

Life was always better in the summer—primitive but pleasant enough ... and there was the hope offered by Vietnam. One more court date loomed. It was a big one that should decide their fate—until David hit 18. It was already fairly certain that Hal would be ending Jon's child support because the university wouldn't take his Asperger diagnosis into consideration retroactively. David would be 18 in October. On top of that, Hal was already bragging to the boys about a better job he would be starting right after the court date. That would mean that it would cost Kat even more if she wanted to have child support adjusted for Tim.

Jon saw the car out of his bedroom window, sneered and

started to turn away. Then, with mild curiosity he made his way to the door. Affable Dave was already outside examining Hal's trophy when Tim arrived in the yard with some friends.

Tim smiled, shrugged and continued into the house to scramble some belongings together before leaving to spend the weekend at a friend's cottage.

Kat heard the commotion. Hal seemed to be making more noise than usual as his wife sat sullen in the front seat. With his plan in place and the courts moving in his direction, Hal had started to include the wife once in a while. Perhaps Jon had blown Hal's cover again with some embarrassing truth. Perhaps Hal just wanted to be noticed. For once Jon didn't ask for money. Late for work as usual he climbed on to his bike and rode off.

Now even David was losing interest. If Hal had given some warning that he was coming he might at least have taken the boys for a ride. As it was they all had plans. David, who was never late for anything, was to meet some friends at the show soon. He hadn't even started to get ready! He was, at best, conflicted.

During his last visit, Hal had told Dave,

"Wait until you find out what the REAL WORLD is like."

Kat shuddered at the thought of sensitive Dave having to live in *Hal's* "real world": judgment and negativity wrapped in a salesman's grin.

Hal had also told Dave that through meditation he'd realized that you create your own reality. Kat doubted if meditation had effected Hal's decision to create his own reality using manipulation and coercion. She hoped that Dave might see through that double entendre.

She also hoped that she would have the time and re-

sources to guide the boys as they tried to centre themselves in a changing world. Could they become so strong in who they were that any forays into a world such as Hal's would be brief, if sometimes confusing explorations?

Kat stayed inside as she always had when Hal showed up. A warm breeze moved the curtains and the smell of new car wafted in. Dave started into the driveway and paused at the car window. He fidgeted as Hal turned to him. Through the open window Kat could hear Hal's soft, chilling voice:

"Hello, Dave..."

Pushing the Envelope

She really wanted a year to plan, but Hal pushed the envelope.

This time Judge Hood presided.

Judge Hood ... Kat recognized this man. At first she didn't know where she'd seen him. Then it hit her.

The boys had been very young—she didn't remember how young. Hal had a visitation that day. He had told them they would get to try laser tag. This time Kat had no trouble getting the boys out. They had never tried this activity. They were excited. When Hal showed up in the driveway they were already out there waiting for him. Kat watched from the window as they lingered in the drive a lot longer than expected, talking. Noting their time of departure had become the astute thing to do, given Hal's propensity for hanging around Kat's house. But this time they didn't depart. Hal picked a fight with Jon and tore out of the driveway, alone, leaving three confused boys to wonder what happened.

As usual, he then told everyone that Kat wouldn't let the boys go with him.

In the aftermath of Hal's purposely disappointing behavior, Kat dried their tears by taking them on a rare outing with her. It was the only time she would ever try laser tag with them. As Kat and the boys waited to enter the laser tag arena, she noticed a man sitting near by. This was the man. This was Judge Hood!

Hal's entourage had long since convinced this judge that Kat's original ex parte order, which had temporarily arrested Hal's harassment, had been unnecessary. In this session, Hal and his lawyer focused only on the question of Jon being full time at university. Hood's final decision was a sentence for Kat, and Jon.

Hal succeeded in costing Kat more than the child support Jon would receive for almost one more year, but at least it was over—for now. Clara had given Hal carte blanch to harass Kat, and now this "right" would be upheld by the courts. Kat still had no voice. Hal wouldn't have to pay for the month he was behind in child support because his lawyer had managed to confuse that issue, and Kat would have to pay for her own defense against Hal's legal harassment.

As usual Hal slipped things into the agreement that implied that these things needed to be there.

"She will not contact me at work."

Kat scowled. Once she had sent a report card to Hal's email at work because he was complaining that she didn't provide them through his email address, though she had. When he received them at work, Sis Bumb wrote a harassment letter stating that Kat was sending funny letters to Hal via email. This innuendo had made it into their most recent

agreement.

"This never happened anyway," Kat told the young lawyer who had been assigned to her at the last minute.

He gave the standard response:

"Then you won't have any problem signing it."

Already crippled financially, Kat knew she would not be able to pay Legal Aid debts and support two of the boys on her own. Hal's plan had succeeded. Kat had all the responsibility, huge debts rolled into the mortgage, most of the costs, no freedom and none of the money. She was not special. He had done this to others.

When you've been bullied for a long time you need someone to stand between you and the bully. Bullying appeared to be accepted procedure in the courts, and respected at least to some degree in most aspects of society. How Kat wished her lawyer would stand firmly between her and Hal. How she wished that a judge would threaten Hal and make him go away. Instead, she always seemed to find herself backed into a corner.

This called for drastic and immediate measures. Would she have the courage to call Hal's bluff? Could she leverage what was left of her equity to move out of this downward spiral before losing everything?

Maybe a judge would agree to an opportunity that could mean work for Kat and provide the boys with jobs and an educational experience. The alternative seemed to be continued poverty and possibly public assistance. "Public Assistance" these days was tantamount forced labour, though Kat already did enough volunteer work to meet their quota. Teaching in Vietnam might be feasible. What would Hal say if he was offered an opportunity to stop paying child support

altogether?

Would 11 years of legal and financial harassment come to an end? Was it time to say goodbye to cold Canadian winters with not enough money to buy heat?

Kat would be a pioneer. No older women went to Asia to teach English. Asians were said to be sexist and there may be other cultural issues to overcome. Asian respect for elders might not extend to older women living independently "out of the box".

The Asian lust to learn English had attracted many teachers from other countries. Vietnam had an abundance of ex patriots—mainly younger men who couldn't make good in their own country. Denny said they all hit the bars at night and complained a lot.

Kat would have to plan meticulously if there was to be a positive outcome for her and her three, gentle, young men. Most who came to Vietnam left within a year.

Was it time to start all over at the age of almost 60 ... in a place that could could prove to be either a hell or a paradise?

Kat emailed Denny George ...

Chapter 17

The Reality

It had been over a week since Kat had managed more than three hours of sleep a night, and a week without respite since tensed muscles in her scalp had become sore to the touch. An odd phenomena was taking place. As she started to relax a sudden, focused tingling like a shock of adrenalin would invade her body, making sleep impossible.

Another new experience haunted her as poverty and age closed in. Though exhausted, Kat had started to dread bedtime. She would wake up in the night in fear. Kat remembered that Hal used to have panic attacks. Had she absorbed his psychoses through behavior he considered normal?

In the final days, as court harassment wore on her nerves, Kat was in constant pain. Was this what it was like to have a nervous breakdown? She could not afford to fall apart on the boys now.

After that last disastrous day in court, Hal showed up in the driveway with his shiny, new wife, shiny, new car, the news that he had visited Ireland the previous month and

that he was now unemployed. Then he invited Dave on a trip to Montreal, where Hal would stay at a hotel and Dave in a hostel. Of course Kat would have to pay to bring Dave home, and all arrangements would have to be made through Dave without consulting Kat. It was the same old Hal tactics, calculated to create confusion.

Hal had locked child support in low and now money he'd hidden through other people was flowing to him from everywhere.

The next day Hal came again to drop off part of a liter of orange juice and three pieces of fruit that had been left in his car during visitation. For some reason, Hal always showed up more often than usual before and after court dates.

Hal would go away and exaggerate his generosity to others, telling everyone that he was buying food for the house. As usual he was thumbing his nose at Kat while staging a show of his own importance. Perhaps he only wanted to say,

"Look what you could have had."

Kat already knew what it was like to live in poverty with a rich man. She knew all too well the depths Hal would sink to in an attempt to destroy her dignity.

She made it clear to Dave that travel arrangements could not involve her, though if Hal wanted to discuss things directly with her she was a phone call away.

Ever since Kat had known him, Hal had been obsessively taking pictures of windows and doors. He still did this and now self-published them on-line. This was his pinnacle. A whole life lived for the retirement at the end was finally coming together for him. The worst thing Hal could think of at this point was to have to pay for university for all of his boys. He had already tried to delay payment to Jon's university to

break his full-time status. Now it was David's turn.

Kat borrowed the money to pay for Dave to start his post-secondary education. Hal would take credit for that.

With every reduction in child support Hal's smoke and mirrors became less effective, in Kat's eyes at least. Though lawyers and judges were somewhat less insightful, by now Hal had to do something that effected the children's immediate well-being to get any response at all from Kat.

Except for the roof over their heads, which they were in danger of losing, there was nothing holding Kat and the boys to any location. After four years, Kat would be eligible for a laughable pension in Canada. Those were four critical years for three boys on the threshold of adulthood. Maybe it was time to sell while they still had property to leverage. Maybe they needed to move to a place where real-estate was cheaper. Maybe they would have to leave the country. Maybe they could hold on to the house if someone rented it, and take their chances in an area that offered more opportunity. By this time, Kat had found homes for almost all of the cats and the boys were old enough to understand ...

Kat contacted some Internet teaching agencies. Without a teaching certificate she might not be paid much, but it was independent work and a possible step toward a working vacation in Vietnam. If David could get some university courses under his belt this year, he might be able to teach there too. It would be cheaper to take their TESOL certificates after they arrived. Could they hold out in Canada for one more year while they put things in place?

As Kat wondered what was to become of her sons, Jon tipped the emotional balance.

"Maybe once we are both *w*orking you and I will be able to help David through university, and I bet Dave will help Tim*,"* he said.

That was when Kat knew that somehow everything would be all right.

... This was the reality.

Chapter 18

2025

In this story, Jon finished his Bachelor of Computer Science and owns a successful, international software development company. He sold a book he had been writing, on procrastination, while procrastinating from doing his studies, and used the proceeds to go into business for himself as a software developer. He is happily married to an accountant, with one child—a proud, 'girl geek'. All the electricity in his homes is provided by windmills.

David became a video game artist and finished his degree in French. For a while he held down odd, bilingual jobs while writing for local media. His wife, a journalist, and their one child, share frequent excursions throughout the world. Through some circuitous route, he helped to improve the windmills that power three villages in Vietnam.

Tim is a successful engineer and father of one. His wife is a famous cook. Tim helped to develop nuclear fusion as a viable energy source. He took wind power to new heights in both Canada and Vietnam, and helped to develop technolo-

gies which reclaim land from the sea and economically turn salt water fresh.

All three men are happily married and live with their families just north of Regina, Saskatchewan for six months out of every year. The rest of their time is spent in Vietnam helping environmental refugees.

At the age of 74, Kat is a well-known author, artist and philanthropist, and a grandmother of three. She has earned the right to slow down.

In 2008, Hal's photographs of Vietnam started to appear on the Internet along with his photographs from other countries, though Kat never encountered Hal on any of her trips. Once he tried to play on Dave's love of travel, saying he would pay to send him to Afghanistan. (Of course, how Dave would get back was uncertain.)

Hal's extradition order for Kat was dropped in 2021, when he disappeared.

Postscript

The entertainment industry usually shows women doing very well as a result of failed marriages. Statistics would indicate otherwise. The discrepancy in the socioeconomic levels of men and women who leave a marriage continues to broaden as time goes on, leaving women increasingly vulnerable.

It takes courage to live creatively between the cracks of society, and energy and creativity to take advantage of the few real opportunities that present themselves.

For older people, especially marginalized single mothers, energy can be in short supply. Many single mothers live lives of oppression. An embarrassingly high number of older women waste their lives and their talents in poverty. As a consequence of single parent poverty, child poverty also continues to increase.

Sociopaths count on this phenomenon, and on a mother's wish to protect her children at all costs. A court system wherein only the lawyers win can become a tool for the ruthless.

"Kat" was fortunate enough to have bright children. She was fortunate not to be made ill by the stress and humiliation facilitated by years of gaslighting. At the writing of this book, she was never able to pay off Legal Aid, and has used her pension to support her sons.

So many women never exit the cuckoo's court.

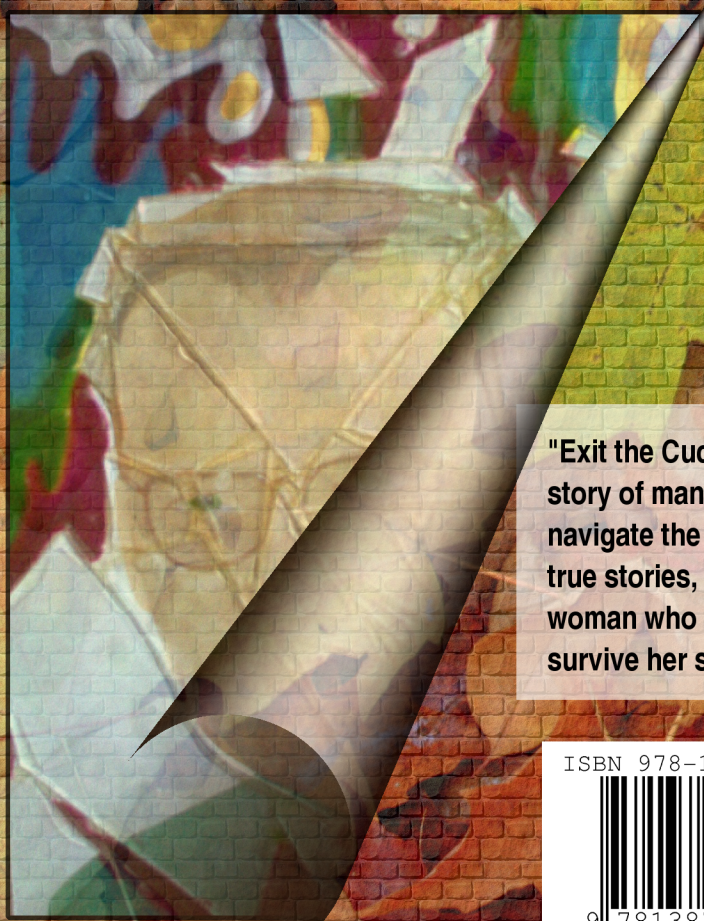
The Children's Poem

Sometimes it's hard to see the greater good
or to realize that better times may come.
Little ones, you are safe.
Keep the fire alive in your hearts.
You know truth from fiction.
In your heart of hearts,
you are safe in your own truth.
It's all we really have.
It's our greatest joy.
Don't lose it.
Let our joy dance through life's farce.
Let our freedom burn it up.
Let the stale opinions of psychological gurus
be our comic backdrop.
As the universe unfolds,
a few specks of dust swirl and are gone;
a judge goes home to supper;
a psychopath smirks in hollow victory—
Life goes on.

Exit the Cuckoo's Court

Second Edition

By Naomi Love



"Exit the Cuckoo's Court" is the story of many people who try to navigate the court system. Based on true stories, it explores the life of a woman who finds creative ways to survive her stalker and move on.

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